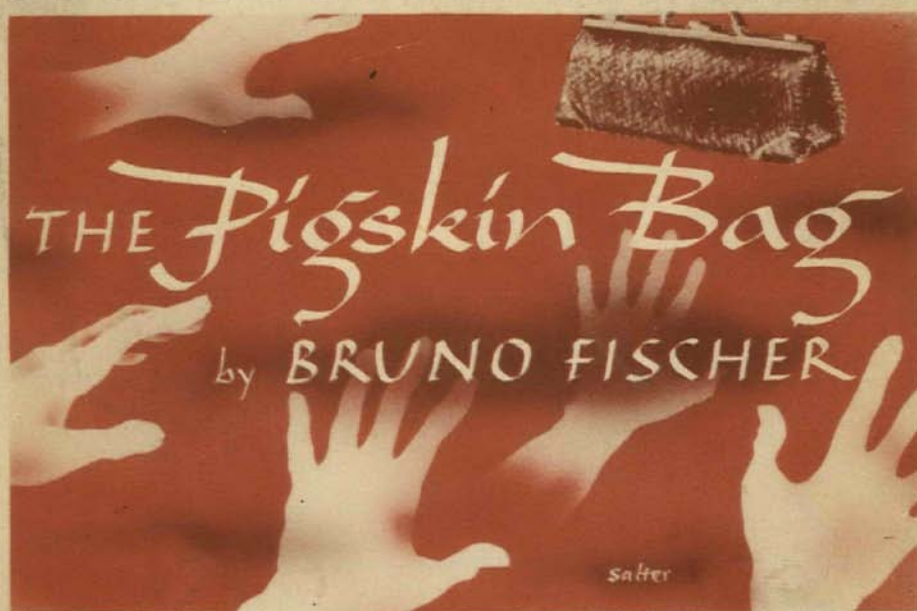


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CHAPTER ONE

I PHONED REDFERN MOTORS from a drug-store on Flatbush Avenue. The boss answered.

"I just dropped Mrs. Garrity off," I told him. "She kept listening to the motor as if she knew which end of a car it was on and made me drive her three times around Prospect Park. Then she wondered if she really wanted a car after all."

"Hell with her," Mr. Redfern said. "We've got ten customers for every car. Somebody was here a few minutes ago asking questions about you."

"About me?"

Over the wire I heard a chair scrape and then a deep sigh as Mr. Redfern settled his bulk into it. Mr. Redfern liked to talk and he liked to sit.

"It was like this, Adam," he said. "He asked were you in. I said no. He didn't ask when you'd be back, like you'd expect a man to if he asked for you in the first place. Fact is, I got the idea he was glad you weren't in so he could question me about you."

"What did he want to know?"

"How long you'd worked for me and how long I knew you and things like that. I'm no fool, you know, so after a minute I asked him what he was after. He said never mind, he'd come around and see you in person when you were in, and he started to go. I went after

him and asked did he want to leave his name so I could tell you he'd called, but he said again never mind and went out."

"What did he look like?"

"A man around forty-five or fifty. His nose was crooked, like it had been broken, and you could bore a hole with his chin. You know him?"

"No." I kicked the booth door open to let cigarette smoke out.

Mr. Redfern's voice lowered. "Adam, you're not in trouble?"

"What kind would you suggest?"

"With the police," he said solemnly. "I'd swear that man was a detective the way he acted. Sort of mysterious, if you know what I mean?"

"Detectives aren't mysterious. They walk around with badges they're always flashing in everybody's face."

"You can never tell how they work." Mr. Redfern's tone dropped another octave to a conspiratorial half-whisper. "I've known you a long time, Adam. I gave you your job back as soon as you got out of the army. Maybe it would be better if you took me into your confidence."

"Shhhh," I hissed, "the wires are tapped."

"What?"

"Listen," I said. "You know me only as Adam Breen, but to the lower depths

of the underworld I am Mr. Z., at present adhering to an exhausting schedule of a corpse a day, except Sundays and holidays."

Mr. Redfern's sigh came over the wire like a gust of wind. "Adam, you're not the funniest man in Brooklyn. I tell you, I don't like the way he acted."

"Probably he's a rival car salesman who doesn't want the premier distributor of Planet automobiles to know that his star salesman is considering buying a good car for a change."

Mr. Redfern said nothing, which meant that he was sore.

I said quickly: "Probably my wife opened still another charge account and Crooked Nose is investigating my credit. The reason I called you is that it's after six and I'm close to home. Do I have to come back to the place just to bring the demonstration car in?"

"Well —" Mr. Redfern dragged it out to show that he was a man of weighty decisions even in minor matters. "All right, but don't leave it in your driveway overnight. Put it in your garage, do you hear?"

I said goodbye and hung up. My legs were cramped when I unwound myself. Phone booth stools and beds were not made for six-feet-two of man.

On the way out of the drugstore I passed boxes of chocolates piled on a glass counter as thickly and geometrically as the downtown New York skyline. I bought one which looked like the latest thing in women's hats.

The street on which I lived in Borough Park was early 1920's, which meant that it had no quietly decaying

houses of imitation European architecture, and that it wasn't jam-solid with gray-brick apartment houses. These houses were two-story red-brick, attached, so that they formed an unbroken line from one end of the block to the other. They didn't quite look like barracks only because of tiny white stoops every thirty feet.

I didn't live in them. I was an aristocrat. The houses on my side of the street, though otherwise exactly like them, were detached from each other by the width of a driveway. We had private garages and even back doors, and sometimes in midsummer the sun flowed as much as two feet into the living room for almost an hour a day. It was practically like living in the country.

The baby carriages were off the street when I reached home and most of the children were in the houses eating supper. It made the neighborhood somewhat forlorn and lonely. I maneuvered the Planet demonstration coupe up the narrow driveway and stopped it at the broader area just in front of the garage. One of the double garage doors swung creakily in the breeze. Esther chronically neglected to close doors, any doors, closet or cabinet or garage.

I rolled up the windows of the coupe and snapped the catches on the doors. If Mr. Redfern expected me to transfer my sedan out of the garage and the coupe in, he needed a course in psychology. The coupe could stand the morning dew as well as my sedan.

Esther, it developed, had left still another door open, the rear left door of the sedan. I entered the garage and

started to slam the car door shut.

That was when I saw the valise.

It sat on the back seat floor. Esther, I thought, had bought something else we didn't need. It was pigskin and looked expensive, though it was by no means new. She must have picked it up at one of the rummage sales from which she filled the house with junk.

I reached in to pull the bag out. Its weight was a shock. I had to tuck the box of candy under my arm and use both hands to swing the bag to the floor. When it was out I could lift it in one hand, but it was still a load. Two thick leather straps were fastened around it to hold the bottom against whatever was inside. It was locked.

"Adam?" Esther called from the back door.

"I'm in the garage."

"I heard your car." Her voice sharpened. "Carol, come back here! You're not even wearing slippers."

Carol cried, "Papa!" and swept around the open garage door. She wore her red corduroy bathrobe over pajamas and her feet were bare. I dropped the bag and swung her into my arms.

"What's that, Papa?" Carol snatched the package from the hand which wasn't holding her. "For me?"

"For all of us, sweetheart."

I nuzzled her cheek. She was big for not quite seven, built like me along string bean lines, but she had her mother's high color, flashing eyes, and black hair.

"Darling, she's just had her bath," Esther called. "She'll catch cold."

I adjusted Carol on my left hip and

carried her out of the garage.

Esther was on the back door stoop. She wore a checked gingham house dress with a wide white collar. Her straight black hair was parted in the middle and hung down her back in two braids, each tied at the end with a tiny brown ribbon, exactly like Carol's. She made a fine picture to come home to, standing there trim and neat without the aid of corsets or elaborate make-up. I slid my free arm about her waist and, with Carol on my hip working on the candy box wrapper, I bent over and kissed her.

Esther's lips were cold. I turned my mouth on hers so that I could look into her dark eyes. They were very wide, staring, but not at me or at anything.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Ooooh, candy!" Carol exclaimed. The wrapper was in shreds. "Mommy, can I have some candy now?"

Esther stepped out of the circle of my arm. "After supper, dear." She tilted her head back to smile up at me. "What's the occasion?"

"Do I need one to bring something home to my family?"

She patted my arm. "You're very smug about us, darling, aren't you?"

"Uh-huh."

"That makes it very pleasant. Please bring her in, darling. I don't want her to be outside right after her bath."

Carrying Carol, I followed Esther through the back door into the kitchen. It smelled of coziness and good food. Tonight I didn't peer into the pots to see what Esther was dishing up. I stood looking at the way her skin was drawn

tightly from her mouth.

"You didn't answer me," I said. "Is anything wrong, baby? Aren't you well?"

Esther stood at the sink with her back to me. "I have a headache."

"Bad?"

"Not very. Please get ready for supper. You came home late and Carol must be starved."

I set Carol down on her feet and went as far as the door to the hall. There I turned. "By the way, I looked in the car and found — What's the matter?"

Esther had whirled from the sink. She stood with a plate in one hand and a serving spoon in the other, and somehow she looked smaller than I had ever seen her.

"Blood?" she said thickly.

"Where's blood?" Carol said excitedly. "In the car? Huh, Mommy, is there blood in the car?"

Esther brushed at Carol's hair as if at invisible flies. She kept staring at me. "I should have looked," she said.

I opened my mouth, but Carol's shrill voice dominated the room. "What blood, Mommy? Why are you looking so funny?"

Esther sucked in her breath. She pasted a smile to her face. "I cut my finger dear, and I got a little blood on the car seat."

"Let's see, Mommy. I don't see any bandage."

"It's only a small cut." Esther looked at me again. "Was there much?"

"Blood?" I said. "I don't know. I meant a bag. A heavy pigskin valise."

She laughed. Most of the laughter

was locked in her throat; only a little trickled out. "Oh, yes, I remember. But I was sure —" She glanced down at Carol's head. "I'll tell you later."

"Tell what, Mommy?" Carol jumped up and down at her mother's side. Her braids bobbed. "About how you cut your finger?"

"Yes, dear, about how I cut my finger."

"Why can't I hear, Mommy?"

I strode across the kitchen and gripped Esther's shoulders. "For God's sake, what happened? What about blood?"

"It's nothing." She pursed her lips and nodded down at Carol. "Aren't you going to wash up?"

What she meant was that she would follow me upstairs where we could talk without Carol listening in. I nodded and dropped my hands from her shoulders and went up to the bathroom.

When I was drying my hands, I still heard Esther and Carol speaking in the kitchen. She could prevent Carol from tagging after her by pretending that she was going upstairs to fetch something. *Was there much blood?* That was what she had asked me, as if she had expected gallons of it poured all over the car seat. I found that I was rubbing my hands on the towel long after they were dry. I bunched the towel in my fingers and stood listening for her to come up. What I heard were dishes rattling in the kitchen.

Why the hell didn't she come upstairs?

"Darling, what's keeping you?" Esther called from the kitchen. "Your food is on the table."

In rage I threw the towel from me and didn't care where it landed. Not rage, I decided as I descended the stairs. I was scared, and because I didn't know why, it was like being scared of a ghost in which you didn't believe.

Esther was ladling stew out of a big pot on the stove. Carol sat at the table, sipping tomato juice and wistfully running her fingers over the red ribbon of the candy box. I took my seat and picked up my juice glass.

"Whose bag is it?" I said. "You can at least tell me that."

Esther's back remained to me "I don't even know his name."

"Whose name?" Carol said. "Whose name do you mean, Mommy?"

"Carol, finish your juice." Esther came to the table with a plate in each hand. She looked as if she hadn't slept a wink the night before, though I knew she had had at least eight hours sleep. And she sat down without saying anything about the bag.

I put down my glass with a thump. "All right, try this one then," I said nastily. "Do you know a man of forty-five or fifty with a crooked nose?"

"Who, darling?" She asked as if she had only half-listened to me.

I repeated the description. "And a pointed chin," I added. "Has he been around here recently asking for me?"

"No. Asking what? Who is he?"

I made myself grin. "That's my mystery. It's not an eighteen-carat one like yours, but it's the best I can manage without more notice."

"What mystery, Papa?" Carol demanded wide-eyed. "Is it a mystery

about the man you said has a crooked nose?"

"I was only fooling," I said. "Eat your stew."

That was one meal where neither Esther nor I tried to shut off Carol's inexhaustible flow of talk so that we could get a word in edgewise. I grunted yes or no as her monologue demanded and every now and then I looked at Esther. She wasn't eating. She wasn't doing much of anything except sitting.

Carol's bedtime was at seven-thirty, but I used the box of candy to bribe her to let me take her upstairs twenty minutes earlier. Putting her to bed was my job; I wouldn't have traded it for anything else I could think of. I carried her piggy-back up to her room, dumped her on the bed where she rolled squealing with laughter, tucked her in, lay down beside her with a book. That was the routine, ending up with reading a chapter.

The story was about two little girls whose names were Alice and Mary and who had been visiting their grandmother's farm for twenty-three chapters. Tonight's chapter, the twenty-fourth, seemed as long as all the others combined.

"Don't read so fast," Carol protested. I forced myself to go slower.

"Papa, do you want to hear a secret?" Carol said suddenly.

"If you think you ought to tell it."

Her arms went around my neck. I felt her breath in my ear and one of her braids on my upturned cheek. "Mommy was crying."

I turned my face and body to her.

"When?"

"When I came home from school. She was sitting in the kitchen crying. She wouldn't tell me why."

"Probably because of her headache," I said.

"I hope it gets better."

"Yes," I said.

I turned back to the book and continued reading. Something had happened to my voice. I had to keep clearing my throat.

CHAPTER TWO

ESTHER SAT ON THE living room couch with her legs tucked under her. She looked dainty and sweet and girlish sitting like that with her braids hanging over her shoulders and her hair behind her ears and that cute gingham dress not covering her knees.

I dropped down beside her. "Carol's asleep. Now what?"

"I'm sorry, darling, for acting so mysteriously." She leaned toward me and I put an arm about her. "I couldn't let Carol hear. She'd have nightmares."

"That bad?" I said. "I've been thumping, baby. You ran over somebody with the car, didn't you? And the man with the crooked nose is an insurance investigator."

"Who?"

"I mentioned him at the table. At around six tonight he came to the show-room while I wasn't there and asked Mr. Redfern questions about me."

"But, darling, I didn't have an accident. I only saw it. What interest could an insurance investigator have in you? I was the witness."

I chuckled with relief. "So that's all it was,— you merely witnessed an acci-

dent." I smiled at her.

"It was worse than that," Esther said against my chest. "After lunch I took the car out to visit Emily. On Fort Hamilton Parkway I stopped for a red light. Just as the light changed a man crossed in front of my car. I remember that he was carrying a bag and moving rather slowly and I waited for him to pass. I was just about to release the clutch when I heard a scream and brakes squealed and I looked sideways and there was the man flying right at me. He actually seemed to be in the air, flying straight at my window."

"Easy, baby," I said, holding her.

She lowered her voice. "What happened was that a car going the opposite direction had started as soon as the red light went off, and the man who was crossing the street wasn't looking. That car struck him and flung him back the way he had come. He landed on his head at the side of my car. I could actually hear his head hit the road. I sat there watching him get slowly to his feet. He reached for the handle of the door at my side and pulled himself up. Then his face was right on the other

side of the door window. It was horrible."

"You poor kid. Bloody?"

"He didn't seem to be hurt, but his face was — well, its color was enough to turn my stomach. He stood looking at me and holding onto the door handle. Maybe I said something to him; I don't remember. I don't remember a crowd gathering, but suddenly people were all around my car and the other one that had hit him and traffic was tied up. Then I saw another man standing beside the man who had been hit. He was pale and trembling; he said he was the driver of the car. He asked the other man if he was hurt. The man who had been hit frowned and said: 'I'm okay.' He said that over and over, 'I'm okay,' and I sat behind the wheel and didn't know what to do. He started to turn away from the car and almost fell and grabbed the door again. He looked at me again and said: 'Mind driving me home, lady? I guess I'm groggy.' I said I would and opened the back door.

"He stumbled when he tried to get in, and several men helped him. Then somebody in the crowd said: 'His head is bleeding.' I turned and he was sitting with his head against the back of the seat and his eyes were closed. I didn't see blood. I never did. I said: 'Where do you live?' I asked him twice before he answered. He said: 'Near here. Let's see —' He was thinking about it, trying to remember. Suddenly the police were there. I saw three or four of them pushing the crowd back and then one of them opened the back door of the car and stuck his head in. He said: 'Are you

the man that was hit?' The man opened his eyes and stared at the policeman in the oddest way."

"The oddest way?" I said.

"His eyes seemed to stand out of his head. I have no idea what he looked like, really, but I remember thinking that his eyes would fall out of their sockets if he kept staring at the policeman that way. Then he said: 'I'm okay. This lady is driving me home.' The policeman said: 'Like hell you're okay. The back of your head —' He glanced at me and didn't finish. I turned in my seat and I still couldn't see the back of the injured man's head. He said: 'Damn it, I'm okay. I ought to know I'm okay.' Okay — that was the word he used over and over, as if trying to talk himself into it.

"The policeman was half in the car and half out. He spoke very gently. He said: 'You better wait for an ambulance, mister.' The man became wild. He said: 'Damn it, I don't need a copper to tell me what to do!' That's what he called the policeman — copper, just like in the movies. The policeman stepped away from the car and spoke to another policeman. He came back and told me that as long as the injured man was in the car already, it would be quicker and better for him if I drove him to the hospital. I said I would be glad to, and the policeman got into the back seat. The injured man had stopped protesting. His eyes were closed again. He sat so very still."

"What about his bag?"

"Oh, yes. One of the other policemen came to the car with the bag and asked if it was the injured man's. The injured

man opened his eyes and said: 'Bag?' He saw the second policeman push it into the car, and he said: 'God, yes, the bag.' Then he started to laugh in a way that made me cold all over. He said: 'Can you imagine that, I forgot the bag?' And suddenly he stopped laughing and put his head back. The policeman outside slammed the door and I started the car."

"And at the hospital he again forgot the bag?" I said.

"He didn't forget. You see —" She started to shake in my arms. "They were so quiet in the back seat, the injured man and the policeman. I think I'd driven about five or six blocks when I heard the policeman say: 'Holy God!' I was driving very slowly. I looked around. The policeman was holding the injured man in his arms. He said to me: 'I think he's dead.' Without warning, without a sound, nothing at all — he was dead."

"Concussion of the brain," I said. "Sometimes it happens like that. They think they're all right, but they're practically dead already."

"Yes, I'd had quite a shock when I'd seen him hit, but it had started to wear off. Now it came back, only worse. I don't know how I drove to the hospital, but it was only a few blocks farther and there I was behind the wheel and I suppose it was easier driving, doing something, than not driving. At the hospital they carried him out of the car. I didn't look. The policeman told me to wait. I sat there in the car and then the policeman came out and took my name and address and told me I could go home."

"And the bag remained in the car."

"The policeman should have thought of it," she said. "But he went into the hospital with the men who carried the dead man out, and when he came back he spoke to me through the car window and didn't see the bag again. In the confusion and excitement it must have slipped his mind. As for me, I couldn't think about the bag or anything. I was numb. I hardly remember driving home. When I was in the house, I went to pieces."

"Carol told me she saw you cry."

"Yes. That made me feel better."

Esther turned her face up to me with a wan smile. "You know I'm not the hysterical type, darling, but it was so intensely personal, the man dying in my car like that."

"I know, baby."

She pressed her face against my chest. "What about that poor man's bag?"

"I'll drive it over to the police station in a little while."

Next door Mrs. Gillette shouted to her boy Allen that it was his bedtime, and from across the street Allen shouted back that it was early. Down the block a horn honked impatiently. Spiked heels clicked nervously past the house and two young women giggled. Somewhere in the street a motor coughed and sputtered and refused to catch. These were the usual pre-twilight sounds which meant home. I felt fine. A man had died in the car with Esther and had spoiled her afternoon and my supper, but he was nobody to us and men were always dying and by tomorrow he would be only somebody to recall when discus-

sing curious experiences. I felt fine because I was home with my wife in my arms and my daughter asleep upstairs in her bed.

The phone rang. I unwrapped myself from Esther and went out to the hall to answer it.

"I'd like to speak to Mrs. Breen," a man said over the wire.

"Who's this?"

"Are you Mr. Breen?"

"Yes."

"I'm Raymond Teacher's brother."

His voice was an agonizing drawl. He treated each word as if it were a sentence by itself.

"Raymond Teacher?" I said.

"He was killed in an accident this afternoon. I understand that your wife was involved."

"She wasn't involved," I said. "She merely drove him to the hospital."

"That's what I meant. I'd like to speak to her, please."

Esther had come out into the hall. "About the accident?" she asked. "Is it the police?"

"The dead man's brother." I handed her the phone.

Esther said into the mouthpiece: "Hello, this is Mrs. Breen . . . Why, yes, the bag is still in the car. My husband found it a short while ago. . . No, we haven't touched it. . . It's still in the car. My husband was going to take it over to the police station. . . Naturally you can have it. We'll be home all evening. . . Yes, that's the right address . . . You're welcome, I'm sure."

She hung up. "He's coming for the bag this evening," she told me.

I had a match up to my cigarette. I shook it out. "I wonder if we ought to give the bag to anybody else but the police."

"Why not, if he's the poor man's brother? Besides, it will save you a trip."

"I guess so."

Carol said: "Mommy, who were you talking to on the phone?"

She was standing at the head of the stairs in her pajamas. She yawned and scratched her thigh.

Esther sighed and went up to her. We worked in shifts putting Carol to bed. Generally it required three or four journeys upstairs before she was settled for the night.

I went into the living room and dropped the match into an ashtray and looked out of a front window. Arthur Gillette was trying to restore luster to his weather-worn Chevy with a can of wax and at the same time arguing with his son Allen to go in to bed. A man leaned against the telephone pole in front of my house and watched Gillette and the boy as if he had never before seen a father having trouble getting his small son into the house.

I went out into the hall. Esther was coming down the stairs. I told her I was going out to the garage. I wasn't sure why, but I wanted to have another look at that bag.

The man left the support of the pole when I closed the front door behind me. His eyes swept by me without stopping at me and then back to Gillette. I stuck a fresh cigarette into my mouth and strode up to him.

"Got a match?" I asked.

"Sure." He dug a matchbook out of a pocket and handed it to me.

His nose wasn't very crooked. It was twisted only slightly at the bridge. Mr. Redfern had been right about his chin except that it jutted out to two points made by a cleft you could have put your small finger into. His eyes were pale-blue and as blank as an infant's stare. Fifty would be about the right age for him, though his compact, muscular body looked younger.

I returned his matches and said: "What do you want?"

His eyebrows went up. He seemed to be smiling, without a muscle moving in his face. "Come again?" he said.

"Late this afternoon you were in the Planet showroom where I work and asked my boss about me without leaving a name. Now you're watching my house."

"What for?"

"That's what I'm asking you."

He laughed without uttering sound. "Is there a law against walking through this street?"

"You weren't walking."

He tossed the matchbook from one hand to the other and back. "You're a smart cookie, aren't you?" That unblinking stare lay flatly on me.

I looked at Gillette polishing his car fifteen feet away. I looked across the street at a couple of girls sitting on a stoop, at a neighbor I knew only by sight sweeping the tiny stretch of walk up to his door, at people strolling in the mildness of a fine September evening. I was glad that it was a nice street and that people were on it and that it was not yet dark. I was bigger than Crooked Nose and probably better with my fists, but I wouldn't have enjoyed speaking to him on a lonely street.

"I'm not smart enough to know what you're after," I said, "except that you're up to no good. Otherwise you'd tell me."

His fist snapped shut over the matchbook. It was a broad, strong fist with dark hair curling up to the second knuckle. "You've got an imagination, mister," he said. He turned with easy grace and sauntered up the street.

CHAPTER THREE

GILLETTE HAD GOT his son to go into the house. He waved the waxing rag at me as I approached his car parked at the curb. He was a dumpy man with his weight centered around his middle. His face could have been cut out of a pumpkin and wasn't made for looking solemn, but he tried it. "Hey, Breen,

that was a hell of an experience your missus had this afternoon," he said.

"How do you know about it?"

"It's in the paper. The Bugle. Just a little piece. It said a man was hit by a car on Fort Hamilton Parkway and he died while your missus drove him to the hospital."

"Did it give her name and address?"

"How do you think I knew it was her?"

Crooked Nose was out of sight. What could he do — walk around the block and take up his watch from behind a tree, or call it a day and go home?

"It must have given your missus a bang, him dying on her like that," Gillette was saying.

"It did."

I walked on to the candy store at the corner. I bored through the usual crowd of young loafers hanging around the newsstand and pulled out the last remaining copy of the Brooklyn Daily Bugle. There had been a run on the paper tonight because the Dodgers had taken a double-header from the Giants. I went into the store, bought a pack of cigarettes, paid for it and the paper, and stood against the wall and opened the paper.

I found it on page three. There were only a couple of paragraphs. The first gave the bare essentials, Esther's story boiled down into two sentences with so many dependent clauses that I had to read them over to straighten them out. The second paragraph gave names and addresses. Raymond Teacher had been the dead man's name all right; he was a foreigner from the Bronx. Howard Pine, the man whose car had struck him, was a local product from Schenectady Avenue.

An accidental auto death wasn't sensational news in Brooklyn.

I folded the paper and tucked it under my arm and left the candy store. Twilight was spreading mellowly over the

street and even the shouts of children were somehow softened. I passed Gillette brooding down at an area on the front right fender he had waxed.

"Why don't you let me sell you a new Planet?" I said.

"When they give them away as grab-bag prizes, I'll be able to afford one." He rubbed more wax into the spot.

A magnificent postwar Cadillac convertible was parked in front of my driveway, blocking it. It had a Florida license plate. From a side angle I saw a man behind the wheel. His hat was pushed away from the back of his head. He needed a haircut. A couple of more steps showed me definitely that he was not Crooked Nose. He was younger and a lot uglier in spite of the fact that his nose and chin were reasonably normal.

Crooked Nose had not reappeared.

I turned my head the other way and saw a man walking down my driveway. When he reached the demonstration coupe, he tried the door. I'd locked it. I strode toward him. He heard me and turned and thrust both hands deep into his topcoat pockets.

It was too warm for a topcoat, but he was wearing one. It was tan camel hair and looked like a lot of money, to match the Cadillac. So did his suit under the open topcoat — shaggy tweed. He wore a tan shirt and a black-and-white necktie with broad stripes running lengthwise. His hat was unblemished pearl-gray. His getup wasn't to my taste, but on him it looked good. His build was boyish, slender, but he carried it well. His face fitted the rest of him. It looked as if it might have been turned out by

a high-class shop which went in for faces. The mustache under his high-bridged, matinee-idol nose was as thin and precise as the edge of a razor blade. He probably fancied himself quite a lad with the women.

"What are you looking for?" I demanded.

At the moment he was looking for it in my face. He took his time answering, and then didn't answer my question.

"Mr. Breen?" he said.

"So what? That doesn't give you the right to snoop in my car."

He smiled. If I were a woman, I might have gone crazy over that smile. "I'm a friend of Ray Teacher. Was, I mean. I came for his bag."

"Are you the man who phoned about the bag a little while ago?"

He wasn't so good. He blinked and the smile faded before he brought it back. "Sure," he said.

"Like hell," I said. "The man who phoned said he was Teacher's brother."

"Oh, sure. But he was busy and asked me to drop around for the bag."

"Then let him come for it tomorrow."

I didn't like Handsome's eyes. They reminded me of Crooked Nose's. You looked into them and saw nothing.

He said: "Ray Teacher's brother is a guy who speaks so slow you can die before he gets the next word out. Does that prove I'm on the level?"

"It proves that you know him, but it doesn't explain why you sneaked down the driveway instead of going up to the door and asking for the bag."

"I just finished speaking to your wife. She said the bag was in the car and she

thought you might be in the garage, so I went to look for you."

Over my left shoulder I saw that the living room lights had gone on. Radio music flowed out through the open side windows. Esther would be sitting beside the radio reading a mystery novel. The man in the Cadillac convertible parked directly across the driveway entrance had his head turned toward us.

"I'm going to drive the bag to the police station," I said. "You can follow me. If you're entitled to it, they'll give it to you."

Handsome took his left hand out of his topcoat pocket and ran the nail of his thumb over his mustache. Portrait of a man in deep thought. Then he said: "Why make all this fuss over a bag with a few shirts and socks in it?"

"Socks and shirts aren't that heavy."

"How do I know what's in it?" he said testily. "All I know, my pal's brother was killed by a car and he asked me to do him a favor and pick up the bag. How would five bucks satisfy you for your trouble?"

"You can get the bag for nothing at the police station."

"I've got a date in twenty minutes. Ten bucks."

I said nothing.

"Okay, twenty. I'm in a hurry."

"Let's hear you come up to fifty," I said.

"Boy, you're a business man." He reached into his hip pocket for his wallet.

"I wanted to hear you offer fifty, that's all," I said. "You told me what I wanted to know. Now beat it."

Slowly his hand reappeared without the wallet and slipped back into the topcoat pocket. "A wise guy," he said reflectively.

"I catch on after a while," I told him. "That secondhand bag isn't worth fifty dollars or twenty dollars, especially not if you're legitimately entitled to it for nothing."

Twilight was spreading over the driveway. He stood very still. The handsome face was suddenly washed-out, tired.

"Never mind the bag," he said woodenly and stepped past me.

I watched him walk up the driveway. He spoke to the man behind the wheel through the window of the Cadillac and then opened the door and got in. I tuned to the garage.

The garage door Esther had left open in the afternoon was still open and so was the sedan door. The pigskin bag was where I had left it on the concrete floor. I lifted it with two hands and shook it. There was a heavy, sluggish rattling, like big stones hitting each other.

I looked up the driveway. The Cadillac hadn't moved. The two men in it were talking it over. Handsome wanted the bag too badly to leave without another try. I thought of how he had not taken his right hand out of his topcoat pocket.

Out of my pants pocket I fished the ring on which were the two sedan keys and I unlocked the trunk and put the bag inside. I locked the trunk and looked over my shoulder through the open door and past the coupe. They

were getting out of the Cadillac.

They came side by side down the driveway, and Handsome's hands were deep in his topcoat pockets. The other man was shorter, but very wide all the way down to his ankles. His face was wide too, and especially his nose which had a pulpy spread to it. He moved as solidly and as relentlessly as a heavy tank.

I stepped out of the garage. My palm sweated against the metal keys clenched in it. They saw me standing there just outside the garage, and Handsome smiled. I turned my body as if to look into the garage. To the left of the garage and in back of the house there was a tiny yard covered by grass which I hadn't cut in weeks. My body was between my hand and the two men, and I hardly had to move my wrist to flick the keys into the grass. In the gathering darkness my own eyes lost sight of the keys before they fell.

They were rounding the demonstration coupe before I turned back to them. I remained where I was, waiting. Handsome came within a foot of me and stopped. The other man stood at my side, not close, his body solid and squat, his face heavy and broad and not pleasant. His right hand hovered with apparent carelessness near the right lapel of his jacket.

"We'll stop horsing around," Handsome said amiably. "Five hundred bucks on the line for the bag."

That shook me. My throat was dry. I said: "I'm not in the business of selling bags which don't belong to me."

"Then what do you want?"

"I want to be left alone."

Handsome stepped back. He sighed. "We don't want to get tough, but show him how we can, Larry."

The squat man casually slid a hand under his left shoulder and brought out a black snub-nosed automatic pistol. He let me take a good look at it lying on his broad palm and then stuck it into his jacket pocket. His hand held it there.

This was the real thing. It was not only a man with a gun. It was a man who carried a gun under his shoulder, in a holster, professionally. He would know how to use it and be quick to use it if he decided that he had to. A killer.

A boy darted into the mouth of the driveway. A second boy followed him, tagged him, and fled with the other after him. A car went by with its lights on. Handsome ran a tongue up to the razor-thin line of his mustache. "Suppose we go into the garage," he said.

He went first. I followed and stood against the wall. The squat man called Larry stopped just inside the door.

It was a lot darker in the garage. Handsome found the light switch and snapped it. He stuck his head through the open sedan door, pulled it out, opened the front door, looked inside, straightened up. He walked completely around the car. He squatted and looked under it. He raised the lid of the built-in cabinet in which I kept tools and tire chains and old tubes and all the other stuff which accumulates in a garage. Then he came back to me.

"Where is it?"

I tried to make myself sound unafraid. "In the police station. I'd just come back from there when I saw you in the driveway."

"Nuts! You wouldn't lug that heavy bag when you have two cars right here. Besides, your wife told me you'd left the house only about ten minutes before. Let's have the key to the trunk."

"I lost it," I said.

Larry spoke for the first time. "You're a big guy, sport. Let's see if you can touch the ceiling."

I raised my hands. Handsome went through my pockets and relieved me of all the keys he could find. He let the keys drop to the floor except the two which were obviously car keys. He tried each of them in the sedan trunk, and then turned to me with a scowl. He didn't say anything. He went outside and used one of the keys to unlock the coupe door and the other to unlock the coupe trunk.

He returned to the garage and stood looking at me with his hands in his pockets. His shoulders were huddled as if against cold. "Where are the sedan keys?"

"I lost them," I said.

Larry poked the gun muzzle harder against the pocket. "How'd you like a slug in the guts, sport?"

I shook my head. "That won't get you anywhere."

"A hero, eh?"

"No," I said. "But you won't do it. The shot will be heard and you'll have to run for it."

"There are ways I don't have to be noisy, sport," Larry suggested softly.

"My death won't give you the bag."

"Stow it, Larry," Handsome said. He ran a thumbnail over his mustache. "His wife told me the bag was in the garage. When I offered him fifty bucks for it, he figured it must be worth a lot more. He saw I didn't drive away, so he had an idea I'd be back and locked it in the trunk. The reason I know it's in the trunk is that he hasn't got the keys on him. A guy always carries his car keys. He threw 'em away when he saw us coming."

"You should've been a detective in the movies, the way you figured it out so neat," Larry sneered. "Okay, so it's in the trunk. All we do is break the lock."

Handsome kept frowning up at me, but he spoke to Larry. "He turned down half a grand for it. Why?"

"You're the mastermind," Larry said.

Handsome looked at the coupe, then at the sedan, then at me. "This house you live in isn't so swell, but you have two practically new cars. What's the answer, Breen?"

My raised arms were getting tired. I lowered them. Larry didn't object.

"The coupe in the driveway isn't mine," I said. "It's a demonstrator."

"A what?"

"The car we use to demonstrate to customers. I'm an auto salesman."

Light leaped over the area just outside the garage. Esther had turned on the kitchen light, but the open garage door blocked us out from the kitchen windows. Handsome walked to the edge of the door and looked at the two

lighted windows.

Larry said: "All right, mastermind, what do you say now?"

Handsome came back with only one hand in a pocket. His other was on the mustache. It was his left hand now. There didn't seem to be a gun in either pocket after all. Larry's was enough.

"Who do you work for?" Handsome asked.

"Redfern Motors on Atlantic Avenue. We sell Planets. Are you interested in buying one?"

"A comedian," Larry grunted. He glanced sideways at Handsome. "Ever hear of 'em?"

"No." It was very still in the garage. Handsome was again searching for something in my face. "I didn't pay much attention to what the guy told me. He still had the jitters."

That was over my head, like most of what was happening. Automatically I asked what guy.

"Howard Pine, the guy whose car hit Ray Teacher," Handsome replied. "I got his name and address out of the paper. He told me he saw the cops stick Ray's bag into this car. Something else he told me I didn't pay attention to. He said he thought Ray got out of the sedan that a few minutes later drove him to the hospital. This sedan. The one your wife drove."

"That's crazy." My voice was so thick it had trouble passing my throat. "Teacher was crossing the street and walked in front of this car. Howard Pine probably didn't see him until he hit him."

Handsome went on as if I hadn't

spoken: "Pine said Ray got up from the road and walked over to the sedan and spoke to your wife and then got in. Why straight to her car? It figures up. It shows why you wouldn't take half a grand for the bag and why you locked it in the trunk and threw the keys away."

"I wish I knew what you were talking about," I said.

Larry took his gun out of his left pocket and held it flat against his broad left palm with his finger on the trigger and his thumb on the safety catch. "This guy needs opening up."

"Plenty," Handsome agreed. "He can tell us lots of what we want to know. But not here."

Esther's voice made my insides jump. She called from the kitchen door: "Are you in the garage, Adam?" She had seen the light, of course.

"Keep her out of here," Handsome whispered harshly.

I nodded. On that we could agree. "I'll be in soon, baby," I said loudly.

"Did you see the man who came for the bag?" she asked.

"I'm giving it to him now."

There was a silence. The kitchen light went out and I breathed again.

"We're dopes," Larry said. "His wife drove the car this afternoon. I bet she's got a set of keys of her own."

My hands clenched. I was going to hit Larry. Maybe that solid frame of his wouldn't go down or he'd shoot me before I completed the swing or after, but I was going to hit that jaw.

"Don't you think I thought of that?" Handsome said testily. "Sure, she's got

keys, but we're keeping women out of this."

Larry snorted. "I can make her hand them over."

I was trembling. I was going to hit him. I couldn't tell them that I had thrown the keys in the grass. Esther would see us search for them and she would come out to ask what we were after. No matter what I did, she would be in it. I was going to drive my fist into his thick jaw.

"I know what you can do to a woman." Handsome's voice was thin with anger. "Only you're not. Get that into your head."

Larry shrugged. I relaxed a little.

"Then how's this?" Larry said. "We drive away this sedan with the bag in it and take Breen along with us. I don't need no ignition key to start it. All I do is disconnect —"

"And what about the coupe parked in the driveway?" Handsome cut in.

"You got the key to that. We drive it out and then —"

"Sure, sure. And drive my car away from the front of the driveway. It'll be like a parking lot where you drive cars in and out. Every kid in the neighborhood will come and watch us. And Mrs. Breen will come out to see what's going on."

"Okay, mastermind, what's your idea?"

"To do it nice and orderly without risk," Handsome said. "We want the bag and we want a long private talk with Breen. You take him out to the Coney Island place in my car. Think you can handle him alone?"

Larry laughed through his nostrils. "This mug?"

"I'll stay behind and work on the trunk. I've never seen the car lock I couldn't open without a key."

"So open it now and we'll all go together."

Handsome glanced toward the street. "We've wasted too much time already. I'll take maybe ten more minutes to get this trunk open."

"So somebody will come," Larry said. "That don't scare me."

"You'd like to use that rod of yours."

"On the big shot it'd be a pleasure."

"Use your head," Handsome said. "That was a stall Breen gave us that he'd received a phone call from him. Why would he call Breen if Breen is part of the outfit? He figures the bag is as safe with Breen as it was with Ray Teacher."

"Then we got plenty of time," Larry argued.

Handsome chewed his mustache. "I know women. Mrs. Breen will wonder

what's keeping her husband. Or she'll worry because he doesn't come right back and she'll come out here."

"So she's still bothering you?" Larry sneered.

"Women complicate things. I don't want to be burdened by her. Breen might get frisky if she comes in, and I don't want shooting, not here and not before we get the bag. You beat it with him. I'll close the door and put out the light and work by flashlight. If she looks out the window again, she'll see the garage dark and figure we're gone. Or if she or anybody else comes, I'll be alone and can pull a bluff." Handsome showed strong white teeth. "Careful and smart—that's the way I like to do things."

"Don't be too smart, that's all." Larry returned his gun to his pocket. "Get going, sport," he told me.

My shoulders left the support of the wall.

The garage light went out. The door creaked shut.

CHAPTER FOUR

TWILIGHT WAS DEEPENING into night, but I was distinct enough to Larry. He walked behind me until we passed the demonstration coupe and then he stepped to my right side, not close. Within a split-second he could send a bullet into me through his pocket, though to anybody seeing us we were two men simply walking up a driveway.

One light was on in my house, in the nearer of the two living room windows. I stopped. Through the frilly curtains I saw Esther snuggled in the English club chair, reading by the light of the floorlamp. The radio was on. A comedian whose voice I did not know was telling a joke.

I had only a view of one rounded

cheek. The rest was hair and a braid. Her head was raised from the book; she was listening to the joke. My throat clogged. It was a time to kiss my wife and daughter good-bye.

Larry stepped behind me and gave me a slight shove with his empty hand. I continued walking and he hurried back to my side. The comedian reached the point of his joke with a rising inflection that ended in a strident giggle, and everybody in the radio studio laughed. And the radio in Gillette's house and other nearby radios audible through open windows also laughed, so that laughter filled the evening. Nobody could be that funny.

Gillette was backing his car to the other side of the street. The headlights swept by us and fixed on his driveway and he rolled his car in. A young man and woman approached us with their arms about each other. All up and down the street there were people sitting in front of stoops, or standing, or getting into or out of cars. It was the way it had always been with the coming of darkness on a pleasant evening. It was ridiculous that none of them should know what was happening to me or that I couldn't let them know.

"You're driving," Larry said.

I slid across the wide seat of the convertible and let my hand drop negligently on the handle of the door on my left. I would push the handle down and fall against the door. My weight would open it and I would spill out with the car between myself and Larry.

"Don't try it, sport," Larry said.

The gun was out of his pocket, held

low and hidden from the street by his body. He was way ahead of me, knew more possible tricks than I could think up. The value of experience. He got into the car with his face and gun toward me. He reached behind him to close the door and sat with his back against it, facing me, the gun resting on his left thigh. I wondered how many times he had done it before.

"Drive to Coney," he said. "Take it nice and easy."

I drove. The car rolled sweetly and powerfully. I looked at my hands on the wheel. They were even bigger than Larry's and probably as hard. They were steady, but the knuckles were white. I loosened their grip a little and looked sideways at Larry, sitting solid and invulnerable with the gun in his left hand.

"You're making a mistake," I said. "I haven't any idea what's in the bag."

"Then why didn't you take five C's for it, like you was offered?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"We aim to understand a lot more. You're the guy who can tell us."

"You'll be wasting your time."

"I've got plenty of time." He grinned. "All I need is a knife and a couple hours with you. There'll be nothing you won't tell me then."

I wet my lips. "Tell you what?"

He shot a glance behind him and brought his gaze quickly back to me. "Let's start with Tilly's. What's the setup there?"

"I never heard of Tilly's."

"Don't give me that. We know they're working out of the Badmont place.

We've never been there because he kept us south. He thinks he's too much big-shot. Never told us much. Only let us do the dirty work and paid off in peanuts. Well, we're here now and we got the bag. What d'you say, Breen?"

"I don't understand gibberish."

"You don't understand what?"

"Never mind," I said emptily. "You won't believe me."

"I'll believe what you say after I get a little knife-work in on you."

There was nothing I could say that would make any difference, so I said nothing. I turned left on Ocean Parkway. A light stopped us. Larry gave another quick glance through the rear window. That was the only sign of tension he showed.

After a few minutes he said: "Hey, you're going too fast."

The speedometer needle was at forty and rising. I passed a couple of dawdling cars. I hunched over the wheel and gunned the motor.

The gun poked into my ribs. His other hand turned off the ignition. Rapidly the car lost speed. There was nowhere to wreck the car unless I wrecked another car with it. We rolled to a stop.

"Not so smart," Larry said disgustedly. "You figured a copper would pick you up for speeding. Next you'd try passing a red light."

I sat gripping the wheel, wanting to break it with my hands.

"Or maybe wreck the car," he went on. "You seen that in the movies. You kill or cripple yourself as likely as me, or I put a slug in you before you hit

anything, so where's the percentage? Start her up!"

I obeyed. Keeping the gun pressed against my side, he reached his other hand up and tilted the mirror toward the right. Then he sat back against the door.

"Turn off on Bay Parkway," he ordered, "and don't do more than fifteen if you don't like to eat lead."

At McDonald Avenue he told me to turn left. I drove between pillars of the Culver Line Elevated. Gravesend Avenue it used to be called before its name was changed. That was a terrific joke for anybody who could appreciate it. I couldn't.

It was a good street for a murder. There were unwholesome looking fields. There were small decaying vegetable gardens which in spring and summer were cultivated by Italians who came to them evenings and weekends from distant homes. There were trains rumbling overhead. A body could be dumped out of a car and not found till morning, or dragged a few feet into a field and not found for a week. But it wouldn't happen here. Larry was anxious to get in some knife-work first. Gravesend Avenue, and my grave at the end of it would be somewhere in Coney Island.

We were almost there. Ahead I could see the orange lights of Belt Parkway and on my left was the massive bulk of Coney Island Hospital. It had to be now, within the next minute or two. I was going too slowly to wreck the car, but there had to be another way.

"Yeah, we're being tailed," Larry

said suddenly. He turned his body squarely to me, "What d'you know about it, sport?"

I looked back. A pair of headlights were a couple of hundred feet behind us. They didn't come closer.

"You keep asking about things I don't know," I said.

"Listen, sport. When we stopped on Ocean Parkway, that heap behind us stopped. When we turned off, it turned off, and turned off again to this street. We're going slow and it's going slow. What d'you make of it?"

"It's your show," I said.

"Yeah, my show. We'll have a look. Pull over."

I slipped the car between two elevated pillars and stopped it at the curb. Larry's flicking eyes divided their attention between me and the mirror. I turned. The car behind us seemed to hesitate. Suddenly it gathered speed. I looked at Larry.

He was leaning toward me, looking at me and at the same time through the left window, waiting for a glimpse of whoever was in that other car. "Remember, you get the first slug," he told me tightly.

The headlights of the other car came through the convertible's rear window. I didn't care who was in it. My hands were light on the wheel, just resting there.

Then the car was even with us. I didn't see it. I felt it, sensed it, and I saw Larry raise his gun in preparation for anything that might happen. It was the moment when his attention was off me as much as it would ever be.

My hands fell off the wheel. My right hand shoved the gun out of line with my body. My shoulders turned with the motion. I drove a short left uppercut to his jaw.

It missed, but landed flush on the broad nose. His head fell away from me. I hit him again. My right hand was frantically groping for his gun-wrist as I kept jabbing my left into his face. I couldn't find that wrist. The gun didn't go off. He sat huddled in the corner of the seat, just taking it with his head bobbing loosely every time I hit him.

I stopped hitting him. He sagged at the angle of door and seat, and his head fell loosely against the window. His eyes were closed. He was breathing raggedly through his mouth and blood ran from its corners and trickled from his nostrils.

There was blood on my knuckles. Not all of it his. I rubbed it off with my handkerchief and saw that the knuckles were split. He had known all the tricks, but had overlooked one—that I could hit a man hard enough to make it count.

I sucked my knuckles and took a cigarette out of my pocket and drew smoke into my lungs. Then I turned back to him. My fist hadn't improved his appearance. I reached past him and pushed the door open and his head fell out, followed by his torso. His legs remained inside.

I bent over and saw his gun on the floor beside his ankle. I put it on the seat, bent over again, pushed his legs and feet out, closed the door, straightened up. And looked into headlights facing me.

The car was parked on the left side of the road, no more than thirty feet away. A man was getting out. He moved rapidly in the brightness of headlights glaring on his crooked nose and double-pointed chin. He held a gun against his hip.

I jammed in the gears, yanked my foot off the clutch pedal, swung the wheel hard. It leaped by Crooked Nose's car, scraping a fender, and was away. I glanced back and got a picture of Larry lying in the glow of the other car's lights and of Crooked Nose looking after me. Then I let the car have its head.

The street was wide enough to swing around in a single turn, but I didn't dare go back that way. I drove past Avenue X before I realized what I was doing. I turned left on a murderously rutted side street and then decided that I would have made better time going on to Belt Parkway, and turned right, and when I reached the Parkway I couldn't find an entrance. I blundered around for a couple of minutes until suddenly I saw Ocean Parkway on my left and headed for it. On Ocean Parkway I caught the lights wrong. I stopped at three or four corners until the staggered lights changed and then I laughed crazily and went through two red lights. Let a cop stop me and I'd take him along.

There was no cop anywhere.

I was almost home when I remembered the gun. I picked it up from the seat. The safety catch was off. Larry had been ready for action. I dropped it into my pocket. Sweat pasted my

underwear to my body.

There was nothing different about my block. I didn't know why I expected anything to be. There were people walking and cars parked at intervals and cozy lights in windows. I stopped the car with a jolt and started to run down the driveway. At the second living room window I checked myself.

Esther hadn't moved, or she was back in the precise position I had last seen her, reading in the club chair and at the same time listening to the radio. The same comedian with the strident giggle was telling another joke, or the same joke. Within the space of a half-hour program I had gone and returned. Again all I could see of Esther was her dark hair and a braid and the curve of one cheek. It was as if I hadn't been gone at all.

I laughed soundlessly with relief and continued down the driveway. I took the gun out of my pocket. The garage door was closed, the light out. I went around the demonstration coupe and opened the garage door. There was no sound except my own breathing. I snapped on the light. The trunk door of the sedan was raised. The pigskin bag was gone.

I didn't care. It wasn't mine. It had meant nothing to me but trouble.

I went to the rear of the sedan and reached up to pull the trunk down. My hand froze. A pair of legs protruded from the side of the right rear tire.

Handsome lay on his side. He was no longer handsome. His face looked worse than Larry's after my fist had got through with it, and the top of his head wasn't nice to look at. His pearl-

gray hat lay near the wall, its crown bashed in. And near the hat was the tire iron.

I squatted and touched the nearest hand. Work it smart and careful, he had said — and he was dead.

I twisted on the balls of my feet and looked at the tire iron. There was blood on half its length and bits of hair. Probably it was my tire iron, the one

that had been in the trunk. I didn't care to look at it closely. I stood up and skirted around the dead man and put out the light and went into the house through the back door.

Esther heard me come up the hall. "Is that you, darling?" she asked.

"Yes."

Sucking my split knuckles, I dialed the operator and asked for the police.

CHAPTER FIVE

DETECTIVE-LIEUTENANT WOODFINCH didn't rise from behind his desk when I came in. He didn't shake hands or say hello or smile. He waved his pipe in a vague arc ending in the general direction of the ceiling and said: "Sit down, Mr. Breen."

There were five or six desks in the office and plain wooden chairs scattered about. I pulled a chair up to the other side of his desk and sat. I tried not to feel like a schoolboy who had been sent for by the principal.

Nothing happened for a while. Lieutenant Woodfinch believed in doing one thing at a time, and at the moment he was loading his curved pipe from an oilskin tobacco pouch which unfolded to the length of a small apron. Not a grain of tobacco spilled. I would have been startled if it had. An unhurried, methodical man, and he looked it. His clothes were without dash; they were precisely cut and carefully subdued. His face, so close-shaven at three in the after-

noon that it looked as if it never needed a razor, appeared in repose. His thinning hair was calculatedly combed at the exact angle to cover most of the scalp. Last night at my house I had decided that it would be tough selling him a car, or anything, even if he needed it.

There were two other detectives in the office, and they also had been at my house last night. The beefy man with the stub of cigar in the corner of his mouth and the black hat glued to his head was named Scavuzzo. The third man was just somebody in a blue suit who sat at a desk with a notebook and pencil. Last night he had sat at my living room table with a notebook and a pencil.

Lieutenant Woodfinch drew on his pipe, critically studied the glowing bowl, then at last looked at me. "So you'd never seen Jasper Vital before last night or heard of him?" he said as if taking up a conversation that had been inter-

rupted a moment before.

"Who?" After I replied, I realized that I had been supposed to say yes or no and give myself away.

"Jasper Vital, the man who was murdered in your garage. He had his name in his wallet, along with around seventeen hundred dollars in cash. It's his own name. Has a police record in Brooklyn. Six years ago he was picked up for running a phoney numbers racket. Didn't like to pay off even the small percentage the winners were entitled to. Not even an honest crook. He got a ten-month rap. After he got out of jail, there was no trace of him in Brooklyn till his cadaver turned up last night."

"He was down south," I said.

Woodfinch cupped his pipe between his palms. "How do you know if you didn't know him?"

"I told you last night that during the ride Larry mentioned that they'd come from the south, and his car had a Florida license plate. Unless it's a stolen car."

"We spoke to Dade County, Florida, by phone," Woodfinch said. "The car was Jasper Vital's all right. In his name. Registration, motor number, everything checks. Lived in Miami. Picked up twice there for being in the slot machine racket. They don't like slot machines interfering with more profitable gambling." He sucked his pipe. "Why do you say it's a stolen car?"

"I only suggested it. That cash in Vital's wallet might have been every cent he owned, and it requires wealth to have a car like that. And he was a

crook. It made sense that way."

"Uh-huh. And now what about Raymond Teacher?"

"What about him?" I said. "Another crook, I suppose. I'm not up on crooks. That's your job."

"A fresh guy," the beefy detective named Scavuzzo grunted. He was sitting on one of the desks and swinging his legs and watching my profile.

Briefly Lieutenant Woodfinch looked at him over the bowl of his pipe and then shuffled paper on his desk. "Raymond Teacher is the name he was born with, but he had others. Will Raymond, Wilson Ray, Ted Wishingdale. Wonder how he thought up that Wishingdale. A mug. In the last ten years was in jail more than out. Assault and battery, stolen cars, stick-up of a beer joint. You'd think he'd die with a bullet in him. Instead he was knocked over by a car like any respectable citizen. Anything to add, Mr. Breen?"

I reached over to crush out my cigarette in the lieutenant's ashtray. All three men watched me impassively.

"Last night I told you everything I know," I said.

"Let's see." Woodfinch leaned back. "We'll start with Jasper Vital offering you five hundred dollars for the bag. Had the cash right in his wallet. Why didn't you take it?"

"Because the bag wasn't mine."

"You sure you didn't look in the bag?"

"It was locked."

"Five hundred dollars is a lot of money. To me, anyway. I suppose to a car salesman too."

I took out another cigarette. I was afraid my hands would shake with anger. "I can understand where those two crooks, Jasper Vital and Larry, couldn't get it into their heads that a man can be honest. Maybe, being a cop, you can't either."

"When a story stinks, it stinks," Scavuzzo commented from his perch on the desk.

"Shut up," Woodfinch told him mildly. "All right, Mr. Breen, you didn't know what was in the bag, but when Vital offered you five hundred dollars you knew it was worth a lot more. So you decided to hold onto it."

"Because the bag wasn't mine to sell."

"Then they put a gun on you, and you still held out on them. What is it—you say you're so honest you'd let them kill you?"

"I'd thrown the key away," I said. "I would have had to search in the grass for it with them and Esther would have seen us and come out. And, of course, I didn't want them to go into the house to get the other key from Esther."

"Why didn't they think of getting the key from your wife?"

"I told you. Jasper Vital insisted that she be kept out of it."

Scavuzzo snorted.

Woodfinch said: "Why would Vital worry about a strange woman?"

"How the hell do I know? Maybe he was a gentleman. Besides, he'd made up his mind that he could get information out of me. If he showed himself to Esther to force her to give up the key, he'd have to take her along too. It

wasn't necessary."

The pipe had gone out. Lieutenant Woodfinch tamped the ashes down with a finger and ran a light around the bowl until he was satisfied with the draw. He took his time. Everybody waited for him.

"What did you know that they wanted to know?" he asked, leaning back again.

"They made a mistake. They only thought I knew something."

"Why did they think that?"

"Because, like you, they couldn't believe a man would refuse five hundred dollars for a bag just because it didn't belong to him."

Woodfinch shook his head. "There's more. They were getting the bag anyway, they thought. They wanted information about something else or about somebody. They were sure you could give it to them. Why?"

I set fire to the cigarette I had been holding between my fingers. I dropped the match into his ashtray. "I think they got the idea when I told them I was working for Redfern Motors. I can't tell you why; I don't know. It might have been something else. Maybe because Howard Pine, the man whose car killed Teacher, had told Vital that he thought he had seen Esther—" I stopped. I could have bitten my tongue off.

Woodfinch's lips twitched. For him it was a broad smile. "Get it into your head that you can't hide anything from the police." He shuffled papers on his desk, selected a typewritten sheet. "This morning Howard Pine identified the

body of Jasper Vital as that of the man who called at his house at a few minutes after six P.M. Vital told him that his name was Webster and that he was a friend of Teacher's and was trying to locate Teacher's bag.

"I quote Howard Pine: 'Webster — or Vital — told me that he had inquired at the hospital for Teacher's bag and they knew nothing about it. He asked me if I knew what happened to it. I said that I had seen the police put it into Mrs. Breen's car. He asked me why did Teacher go straight to Mrs. Breen's car when he rose to his feet instead of to one of the other cars which had stopped on both sides of the street. I said I didn't know. He asked if Teacher seemed to know Mrs. Breen. I said all I knew was that they were talking together before he got into her car. For all I knew, I said, it was even possible that Teacher had got out of Mrs. Breen's car. I remember seeing Teacher cross in front of her car, and he might have got out of it when it stopped for the red light and then he crossed in front of it to get across the street before the light changed. Vital asked if I was sure of that. I said no, I couldn't be sure. Then Vital left.'"

Woodfinch looked up from the paper and blew smoke at me.

"That means nothing, of course," I said, "It was just an idea Vital put into Pine's head."

"By itself it doesn't," Woodfinch agreed. "Certainly not enough to convince Vital that you were connected with Teacher. But something else did. Something more important than the

fact that you turned down his five hundred dollars. What was it?"

"I wish I knew." I sat hunched over, holding my cigarette between my knees.

Woodfinch said: "Let's go on. Vital tells Larry to take you to Coney Island. Why not have Larry stay with him till he gets the trunk open? Safer for the two of them to drive you. Why the rush?"

"That's another thing I explained to you last night. Vital wanted me out of there in a hurry before my wife came out to see what was keeping me or to get in on the conversation. He must have seen something in my face when Esther called out and guessed that I'd start throwing my fists if she was in a position where they might have to harm her. If there was shooting, they'd have to run for it without the bag. Besides, they wanted me alive to learn whatever they thought I knew. Vital was using his head."

"He used it, all right. He got it caved in by a tire iron."

"Which was in the open trunk and had only to be reached for."

Woodfinch gently knocked out his pipe, ran his pinky inside the bowl, unfolded his pouch. "Now we come to where you're a hero. You were overseas, you said?"

"Seventeen months."

"See action?"

"A little strafing and bombing and shelling. I was in supply."

"Didn't you want to get into combat?"

"I did what I was told. I knew cars, so they put me on jeeps. You can check

that easily enough, though I can't see what that has to do with anything."

"Brother," Scavuzzo said, swinging one leg against the desk, "there's nothing we don't know about you. We've been checking you all morning."

"So why these questions?"

"I was thinking," Woodfinch said, polishing his hot pipe against his cheek, "that maybe I could understand a man, who was hardened to combat fighting, tackling an armed man in the close quarters of a car."

"But I'm not the type, is that it?" I twisted my mouth. "Listen. What did I have to lose? I was being taken to torture and death."

Scavuzzo took out his cigar and snorted and put it back.

I turned to him. "I suppose no murdered bodies are found in Brooklyn? I suppose nobody's ever been tortured by gangsters in Coney Island or Flatbush or Bay Ridge or anywhere else in Brooklyn? I suppose Murder, Inc., was just newspaper propaganda?"

Scavuzzo said: "We cleaned that up."

This time it was my turn to snort.

"All right," Woodfinch said mildly. "So you were sure you were going on a one-way ride. So you turned and socked him in the close confines of a car seat and knocked him out cold before he could shoot you."

"His attention was on the other car passing us, the one driven by the man with the crooked nose."

"We'll get to him. You must be pretty good if you could K.O. him with one short jab."

"I am," I said.

Scavuzzo slid off the desk and came around for a front view of me. "Yeah, you're good," he said. "Especially the way you think up stories."

I ignored him. "I was division boxing champion in France," I told Woodfinch.

"A prizefighter?" Woodfinch sounded almost interested.

"Only an amateur. Your investigation of me wasn't so good if you didn't learn that I reached the Golden Glove finals when I was a kid. I was too tall for my weight and hadn't much science, and in the finals I was cut to pieces and lost on points. But I could always hit, and last night I gave Larry my Sunday punch. A lot of them." I smiled up at Scavuzzo. "Would you like a practical demonstration?"

Scavuzzo said: "Why, you mug!"

Lieutenant Woodfinch was laughing. We all looked at him in surprise. He broke off, looked embarrassed, and his face resumed its normal attitude of repose.

"Sit down, Scavuzzo," he said placidly. "All right, you have a wonderful sock, Mr. Breen, and you knocked Larry out. He was a criminal. Why dump him out of the car? Why not take him to the nearest police station?"

"He might have recovered consciousness on the way. I couldn't be bothered with him. I wanted to get home as fast as I could to make sure Esther was all right. For all I knew, Vital had gone into the house after all to get the key from her as soon as I was out of the

"You said he was a gentleman. He wouldn't get tough with a woman."

"Why should I have believed that about him?"

"You might have picked up a cop on the way."

"I didn't pass any."

There was silence. Woodfinch's pipe bubbled. He frowned at it, then took a pipe cleaner out of his desk and worked on the stem. The lack of words got under my skin. That was probably the idea.

I said: "Have you found out who Larry is?"

"No." Woodfinch pulled the cleaner through the pipe stem. "If there is such a person."

"My God!" I said. "He was in my garage, he took me for a ride. I knocked him out, I dumped him on McDonald Avenue."

"He wasn't on McDonald Avenue when I sent a squad car."

"That was almost an hour later. By that time he'd recovered and gone away."

Woodfinch pushed his pipe together and unfolded his pouch. He was taking it very slowly. A war of nerves. "Nobody saw this man Larry. Not even your wife."

"What about Gillette?" I said. "He was driving his car into his driveway when we came out to the street."

"He says he didn't see you."

"What about Larry's fingerprints on the gun and the car?" I said desperately. "A man like that must have a police record."

Woodfinch looked at Scavuzzo, and

Scavuzzo said: "You find fingerprints in detective stories. In all my life I've seen only two usable prints on a handgun, and one was a fluke. Then the car. The outside was wiped that day. Lots of people put their fingers on door handles and door frames and the wheel. Too many people. The only prints brought up were smudges. Trouble is people don't put their prints on a clean surface and then keep everybody else from messing them up."

"But guns can be identified," I persisted.

Scavuzzo shrugged. "The war scattered lots of Colt 45's all over the country. Maybe we'll trace this one and maybe we won't."

"But where would I have got the gun if not from Larry?"

"Vital had no rod. Could be that was his."

I kept trying. "Didn't Larry go with Vital to see Howard Pine?"

Lieutenant Woodfinch had a light that satisfied him. He answered that one. "Pine says only Vital visited him. Only Vital visited the hospital and asked about the bag. Only Vital spoke to Patrolman Craw who drove Teacher to the hospital with your wife, and he learned from Craw that the bag was probably still in the car. Larry is just somebody you told us about."

"And I suppose the same goes for the man with the crooked nose?" I said angrily.

"Well, he at least was seen by Mr. Redfern," Woodfinch conceded. "But we don't know who he is except that he was at your place of work yesterday

and asked Mr. Redfern how long you'd worked for him and didn't leave his name. We've only your word that he was watching your house and later followed you and Larry."

"Gillette saw him outside my house."

"Gillette remembers that you spoke to a man, but he says he paid no attention to him and has no idea what he looked like."

"What about the man who phoned me about the bag and said he was Teacher's brother?"

"Once again—we have only your word to go on, Mr. Breen. Sorry."

"That's no surprise," I said. "But I spoke to whoever that man was and my wife spoke to him too. Isn't she a witness? And look—he must also have made inquiries about the bag before he knew it was in my car."

Woodfinch started a nod and cut it in half. "There were two inquiries. Vital spoke to Patrolman Claw in person. Shortly after that a phone call came to the desk about the bag and Claw was put on the wire. Guess he was the guy who phoned you because he also said he was Teacher's brother. Claw saw no reason not to believe him and told him where he thought the bag was."

"What's the matter with you police?" I said. "That bag was police business when Teacher died. Claw should have gone to my house for it as soon as he realized it had been left in the car."

"We all make mistakes," Woodfinch said in the tone of a cop placating an irate citizen. "Claw couldn't know the bag was valuable or important."

"Anyway, you can't say I dreamed up

the man who said he was Teacher's brother. He was after that bag. He went straight to the garage and found Vital there and killed him and left with the bag."

"Is that your idea?"

"It stands to reason. I can't prove it. That's your job." I turned to Scavuzzo. "Were there fingerprints on the tire iron?"

"Brother," Scavuzzo said, the cigar bobbing in his mouth, "these days killers know too much about prints to leave 'em around. Even when they've had no previous experience. That tire iron was wiped clean except for the bloody part. All it shows is that you could've wiped it off. Say, another one of your red herrings."

"So that's it?" I said to Lieutenant Woodfinch. "That's the way you're going to play it?"

He didn't appear to have heard me. He stood up and put his hat on without saying anything to me.

"Does that mean you're finished with me?" I asked.

The corners of his mouth lifted in what was possibly a smile, but the rest of his face remained static. "No, Mr. Breen, I'm not finished with you. Stay here till I come back."

"Have you the legal right to hold me?" I demanded.

"No, Mr. Breen, I have not, but I can get it if you make me. I'm not holding you." He knocked out his pipe and headed toward the door. The stenographer closed his notebook and followed, and so did Scavuzzo.

"Lieutenant," I said. All three men

turned. "Last night I told you that Larry mentioned somebody named Tilly. Is that a clue?"

Woodfinch looked vaguely annoyed. "There are thousands of women named Tilly, or it might be a Mr. Tilly."

"There was an address that went with it. Bad-something. I can't remember exactly. I think I told you Badley Place. Tilly on Badley Place. That ought to narrow it down."

Lieutenant Woodfinch shrugged. "Except that there is no Badley Place in Brooklyn or anywhere in New York."

So that was that. Everything that might have helped came smack up against a dead end. I crushed out my cigarette in Woodfinch's ashtray piled high with pipe ashes and burned matches. I heard the door close and they were gone.

I wasn't left alone for more than a couple of minutes. Scavuzzo returned unpeeling the wrapper of a fresh cigar. This time he placed a chair behind his desk and sat in it tilted back precariously and blew smoke at the ceiling. It was four-ten on my wristwatch. I went to one of the windows and looked down at back yards through a screen of clotheslines. I could feel Scavuzzo's eyes on my back.

"Is Lieutenant Woodfinch going to

search my house for the bag?"

"If he wants to. He's got a warrant in his pocket."

"Why doesn't he want me around when he searches the house?"

Scavuzzo grinned and blew smoke at the ceiling.

I smoked four cigarettes, lighting one from the stub of the other. Then I said: "Have you any idea what was in the bag?"

"We're waiting for you to tell us."

"It was heavy," I said. "Something like large stones inside. Maybe jewelry."

"Sure. Say fifty pounds of uncut diamonds. Say a couple of thousand carats each so they'd rattle like large stones."

"How about gold bullion?"

"Where'd they get it? Rob Fort Knox?"

"It wasn't money," I said. "But something valuable enough to kill a man for."

"Now you're kidding, Mr. Breen." He grinned again.

Conversation didn't get anywhere. I went to the window again and looked at back yards and smoked cigarettes until my pack was empty.

At a few minutes after five the phone on Scavuzzo's desk rang. He grunted into it, hung up, told me I could go home.

CHAPTER SIX

THE OFFICES OF THE Homicide Squad were on the second floor of the police station. Scavuzzo accompanied me to

the head of the stairs. "Stick around where we can get you when we want you."

"You know, where I live," I said.

"Well, don't leave town."

"Why should I?"

Scavuzzo grinned and said, "Be seeing you," and went back up the hall. I descended the stairs.

In the lobby a young woman stood with one arm on the high desk. The desk sergeant, a bald, chubby man, was simpering at her, and she was laughing in a husky, pleasant voice. Whatever wit was passing between them was ended by my appearance. The sergeant said in a stage whisper: "There's Breen."

She turned. She was tall and broad-shouldered and wore a wide-belted blue coat which did not quite reach her knees. "So long, Sarg," she said with a smile that took thirty years off his age.

I waited for her to come over to me. She had a forthright mannish walk. "I'm Molly Crane of the *Courier-Express*," she said.

"I've nothing to say," I muttered and headed for the door.

Molly Crane fell into step beside me, not having to hurry like other women who tried to keep up with my stride. We went through the swinging doors together, each of us through a door, and then down the steps like the leaders of a platoon marching in double file. It was comic in a way, especially as she said nothing during the march, and there was nothing I wanted to say to any reporter.

When we were on the sidewalk, she tucked her hand intimately through my arm. "What we need, Adam, is a drink."

I said: "You're wasting your sex-

appeal on me. Not that you haven't plenty, but I'm not in the mood for it. I've done enough talking for one day."

"The cops must have given you a pretty bad time, Adam."

"Mr. Breen to you," I said. "I'm going to be as formal as hell if that will help get rid of you."

Molly Crane hung onto my arm and smiled. That smile was calculated to melt stone. It didn't make me simpler the way it had the desk sergeant, but you couldn't get tough with it. Besides, I could use a drink after that session with Lieutenant Woodfinch, and I could think of worse drinking companions.

"Okay," I submitted.

With her hand still through my arm, we walked up the street. She wore no hat. A wide blue ribbon was tied over her hair which was the color of store-bought honey. It fell loose and wavy to within an inch of her shoulders. Her shoes were low-heeled. They helped her mannish stride and cut her down nearer to the size of ordinary women, though even so her shoulders weren't more than four inches below mine.

Around the corner there was a beer joint. A couple of men were drinking beer at the farther end of the bar and listening to the Dodger-Giant game on the radio. It was at the end of the eighth with the Giants ahead 9-3, but the two men and the bartender were tense with hope because we had two men on base with one out.

I ordered a bourbon highball and Molly Crane a sidécar. The bartender mixed the drinks with a head cocked

to the radio.

"Look," I said to her. "It's not much of a murder. No glamor. Nobody important is the victim or the killer. The Brooklyn papers aren't giving it much space and the New York papers only a couple of lines or nothing. Why should the New York papers send you over here for a story they're not interested in?"

"I wasn't sent. This is my own idea. I'm a feature writer, and the city editor lets me dig up my own stuff. You know, human interest."

"Molly Crane," I said, thinking about the name. "I read the *Courier-Express*. I don't remember your name."

"I almost never get a byline. Not yet. But a really big story will make me." She touched my hand and gave me the smile. "I think you can help me get it."

Her eyes were gray flecked with yellow. Her earrings looked like wedding rings, broad gold bands, two of them on each ear. They jangled when she turned her head to the bartender bringing up our drinks.

"What's big about this story?" I asked when the bartender had hurried back to the radio. The Dodgers had the bases loaded now and still only one out. A six-run rally wasn't impossible. We'd done it before.

Molly Crane sipped her sidecar and made a wry face. "Bitter." She put the glass down. "I've been hearing things, Adam. I'm friendly with a number of cops."

"Lieutenant Woodfinch?"

"I haven't met him, though I intended to. Cops aren't in the habit of

chasing me away."

"You don't strike me as being easy to chase away."

"Anyway —" She lifted her cocktail glass and spoke into it. "There's a rumor that you know what was in the bag Teacher left in your car."

"That's a polite way of putting it."

She drank, her face showing that she didn't like the sidecar, but she finished it. "The police think you have the bag."

I pushed my half-finished highball away and got off the stool and dropped money on the bar. She stood up also. A Dodger hit into a double-play, ending the inning without a score.

"You're a funny guy," Molly Crane said when we reached the sidewalk.

"I like a good joke. I'm almost hysterical with laughter because the cops are on the neck of an innocent man, and I'm the man."

"You haven't denied that you have the bag."

Her hand was back on my arm. I shook it off. "What are you after?" I said. "If I say I haven't the bag, there's no story for your paper. If I have it, I wouldn't tell you. Either way you don't get anything."

Her gray eyes regarded me gravely. "We could help each other."

"We could if you have any idea who the man is who phoned me last night, the one who wanted the bag and called himself Teacher's brother."

"You think he murdered Jasper Vital?"

"I know he did. That's the only way it makes sense."

"I've been around. If you're per-

factly frank with me, I might be able to help."

"Look," I said. "I'm tired and frightened. I admit it. To you this is just a story, a chance to rate a byline in your paper, maybe by luring me into making a confession. I've told everything I know to Lieutenant Woodfinch. He has it neatly typed out. Your sex-appeal will persuade him to show it to you, and then you won't believe it any more than he does. So long."

I walked away.

"Thanks for buying me a drink," she called after me.

"Sorry it didn't taste better," I said over my shoulder and went on.

Carol and Susan Levy were playing jacks on the sidewalk. When Carol saw me, she snatched the ball from the other girl's hand and gathered up the jacks and ran to me with hands full and braids flying. I swung her up in my arms.

"Papa, policemen were here," she cried. "Mommy made me go out of the house, but Allen Gillette said they were policemen." Her dark eyes snapped with excitement. "Allen said they were detectives and a man was killed in our garage. Allen was lying, wasn't he, Papa?"

"He was teasing you, sweetheart."

I carried her past Gillette's house. A window curtain parted; a pumpkin face peered out at me. When I stared back at Gillette, his face withdrew. The police had asked him if he had seen Larry or Crooked Nose. That was high drama in his life, something he would be eager to talk over with me, but not if it meant

having to face somebody who was perhaps a murderer. I could feel his eyes continue to watch me.

"Papa, Susan's father said it too," Carol was saying. "Susan's father told her mother a man was killed in our garage. It isn't true, huh, Papa, is it true?"

"It was an accident."

"How did it happen, Papa? Who was the man?"

Susan Levy saved me from thinking up a reply. She was waiting in front of my house. "Aren't you going to finish the game, Carol?"

"Can't you see my father came home?" Carol said importantly.

The door opened and Esther stood in the hall. She had a smile for me, but it was a wan, forced thing that required an effort. Her face had lost its rich color. She kissed me before I could put Carol down—a fierce, clinging kiss that had no passion but only fear.

I set Carol on her feet. "Did they search the house?"

Esther nodded vaguely and looked back at the phone, as if expecting it to ring. "That man called a short while ago, the one who called last night and said he was Raymond Teacher's brother."

I stared at her. A thin line of madness ran through everything that had happened since six o'clock yesterday. "What did he want?"

"He would only speak to you. He said he would call back. I didn't—"

"Mommy, what man called?" Carol broke in.

Esther said sharply: "Carol, for God's

sake!" she caught herself and made her voice casual. "A man Papa is trying to sell a car to. Come into the kitchen and help me with supper." She rolled her eyes toward the stairs — a signal to me.

I went up to our room. Esther followed in less than a minute. She left the door open, stood just inside the room so that she could hear Carol in case she decided to follow. "I set her to shelling peas," she explained. "That should keep her busy for a few minutes at least."

"Why didn't you get rid of her like this yesterday when I wanted to know about the bag in the car? You could have followed me up to the bathroom."

"It was a long story and I wanted to tell it all at once." She shook her head distractedly. "Does that matter now?"

"What about that phone call?"

"He asked to speak to you. That slow voice of his frightened me so that I could hardly tell him you weren't in. Then he said he'd call back and hung up."

I reached in my pocket for the cigarettes I had bought on the way home, but didn't get them out. Esther threw herself at me and held me. "Darling, he's the man who killed Jasper Vital. Shouldn't we call the police?"

"What did Lieutenant Woodfinch do beside search the house?"

"He came with two other detectives and asked all sorts of questions. Then they searched every corner, from the attic to the cellar." Her fingers dug into my back. "Darling, they think you have the bag."

"Yes."

"But those men were criminals. Vital

and the others. Can't they investigate you and find out that you never did anything wrong in your life?"

"They did," I said. "This morning, I think, Woodfinch had an idea I was one of the gangsters. By this afternoon he found nothing shady in my record, so he figures it another way. When Vital offered me five hundred dollars for the bag, I realized that it must be immensely valuable and I picked up a tire iron and killed him and hid the bag. Then I made up a cock-and-bull story about Larry and Crooked Nose and being taken for a ride and knocking out Larry. The thing is that I can't prove that Larry exists. They think he's only a red herring."

"But they didn't arrest you."

"They don't think they have enough evidence yet."

I felt her stiffen against me. "Lieutenant Woodfinch asked me so many questions. If Raymond Teacher had been in my car before the accident. If I had seen this man Larry. If I heard anything in the garage. He went on and on like that."

"That's why he kept me at headquarters," I said. "He wanted to speak to you without me around."

"Darling, the real murderer is going to call back. If we let the police know, they'll be able to trace the call as soon as it comes and capture him."

"Funny," I muttered.

She tilted her head back. "What do you mean, funny?"

"This man who killed Vital is no dope. Why should he stick his neck out talking

less —" I paused.

"Unless what?"

"Unless he has reason to believe I wouldn't be anxious to give him away. Or unless he has nothing to be afraid of."

"But he did kill Vital?"

"I can't see it any other way," I said. "You're right, though. We should call the police before he calls back."

She took her arms away from me and together we went down the stairs. The phone rang before we reached the hall.

We looked at each other. Esther closed her eyes and gripped the banister. I went down the remaining stairs. "Hello?" I said into the mouthpiece.

"Adam Breen?" that agonizingly slow voice said.

"Yes?"

"You know now that the bag's no good to you."

Esther had come to my side. I looked at her without quite seeing her. "What is it?" she whispered tensely. "You turned so pale."

"Hello, Breen?" the dragging voice said.

"I don't know what you mean," I heard myself say.

"You can't use the bag. I'll give you a grand for it."

"I haven't got it."

"That's the top price, Breen. Take it or your life isn't worth a dime."

"You have the bag," I said.

"Save that for the coppers. Do we do business?"

"I can't, I tell you. I swear —"

"Then it's your funeral," he said

There was a click at the other end of the line.

"Listen," I said. "Wait. Let me —"

I stopped talking into the dead phone. Slowly I hung up and stood facing the wall.

Carol demanded: "Who called up? Who'd you speak to, huh, Papa?" She had come out to the hall.

Esther whirled. "Get into the kitchen!" she snarled. "And stay there!"

Carol's mouth went slack. Her mother had never before spoken like that to her. She darted back into the kitchen.

I heard Esther breathing hard at my side. "Darling, did he say he didn't have the bag?"

"He offered me a thousand dollars for it."

"Then he couldn't have murdered Jasper Vital!"

"The murderer has the bag." I jerked myself erect. I slammed my fist into my palm. "Goddam it, what am I going to do? I can't make anybody believe I haven't got it."

Esther was staring up at me as if she had never seen me before. "Darling, you can be honest with me."

I met her dark, sick eyes. I wanted to yell, but I kept my voice low. "You too?" I said hoarsely.

"I didn't mean that." She was hard against me, sobbing against my chest. "Oh, God, I didn't know what I was saying."

Tenderly I patted her hair. "Forget it, baby. We say all sorts of foolish things when we're scared."

Carol timidly poked her head into the hall. "Mommy, aren't we going to have supper?"

"In a minute, dear," Esther told her without turning her head. "Go back into the kitchen."

Carol's head vanished. Esther stepped out of my arms and sniffled. I handed her my handkerchief. She said with the handkerchief to her eyes: "Maybe he'll call again. Hadn't we better let the police know right away?"

"I'm not going to tell the police."

The handkerchief remained at her eyes. "Why not?" she muttered.

"What will I tell the police?" I said. "That the man I've been insisting murdered Vital and took the bag hasn't got

it after all? That'll be almost as good as a confession."

"You're going to keep quiet about it?"

"I don't see what else I can do."

She took the handkerchief from her face. Her eyes were dead. There was not even disbelief in them, not even horror. She said listlessly, "I'm going up to wash my face," and turned to the stairs.

I lighted the cigarette I had wanted for a small eternity.

The smoke was harsh and bitter in my throat.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MR. REDFERN SAID: "You can't kid me, Mr. Z. Your schedule of a corpse a day is a phoney."

His fleshy face was set in stern, hard lumps. His cigar was as inflexible as a naked flagpole sticking from a corner of his mouth. I looked blankly at him as I got out of the demonstration coupe which I had driven home Monday evening. A little matter of murder had prevented me from returning it and showing up for work until now, Wednesday, nine A. M.

"You're falling down, Mr. Z.," Mr. Redfern said. "Here the week is almost half over and only one murder so far."

Abe Silvers and one of the other mechanics had come over to this side of the maintenance room. They stood with their fists on their hips and mouths

poised to grin as soon as they got the point of the gag. Mr. Redfern's humor was the sort that built up to a terrific letdown, but he was the boss, so we laughed. Nobody laughed now.

"All right, it's funny," I said, "whatever it is."

"Who's trying to be funny?" Mr. Redfern tapped my chest with a pudgy forefinger. "You were trying to be. Monday. You phoned me and I told you, a mysterious man was asking questions about you. Then you gave out with wise-guy stuff about being Mr. Z. with a schedule of corpses every day but Sunday. And what happened a few hours later right in your garage?"

He sounded angry about it.

Abe Silvers said eagerly: "Gee, Adam, what's it about? The cops were here

yesterday and looked all over the place, like we had something hidden here."

"They acted like maybe I was a criminal," Mr. Redfern complained. "Like I was Mr. Z.'s boss. They asked me about you. That I can understand; a man was murdered in your garage. But why did they want to know all about my business?"

I walked across the maintenance room to the office. Mrs. Hesterberg turned from her typewriter; her eyes glittered excitedly at me from behind her black harlequin glasses. Since Monday night I had achieved glamor.

"You had plenty of excitement," she said tentatively, as an opening wedge for detailed conversation.

"Plenty." I hung up my hat and went into the showroom.

Mr. Redfern tagged after me. He removed his cigar with a flourish, stepped close to me, made his voice low and confidential. "Now we're alone, Adam, you can tell me. I know you're in trouble."

"Yes."

"I asked you the same thing when you phoned me Monday evening," he reminded me triumphantly. "But all you gave me was wisecracks."

"I didn't know then that I would be in trouble."

A plump hand went to my shoulder. "Adam, you've been working for me a long time. I gave you your job back without question when you came out of the army, and gave you a salary even though there weren't any cars to sell yet. You can talk to me like to a father."

It was easier to tell him than not to.

I left a lot out, especially about the man with the dragging voice who had phoned me twice. Even so, his hand withdrew from my shoulder before I was quite finished. Although he didn't move, all of him seemed to be withdrawing.

"There it is," I said. "It mightn't sound reasonable, but that's not my fault. Do you still want to help me?"

He frowned uneasily. "The police — well, I couldn't interfere with them — I mean even if I was in a position to."

"There's one thing," I said. "Those two crooks changed their attitude toward me when I told them I worked here. They got the notion I knew something important. Why?"

"My God, what did you get me into?" Mr. Redfern burst out. "Yesterday the police were here and turned the place upside down. They had a warrant, but they wouldn't tell me what they were looking for. What will happen to my reputation if police keep coming in here —" He stopped. His eyes widened. "They were looking for that bag. My God, they think I'm hiding it for you!"

"Or that I came here late Monday night and hid it because I work here and have a key. But that doesn't explain why Jasper Vital and Larry thought I was a gangster too when I told them that I worked for you."

"My God, what are you saying? Did you tell the police that?"

"I had to."

Mr. Redfern said bitterly: "You don't care what you do to my reputation as a businessman."

"All right, fire me."

He looked at me with his mouth

working, as if it were practicing for words as soon as his brain released them. Then he said weakly, "I guess we're both excited," and went into the office.

After I swept the showroom and polished the four floor models, there was nothing to do but wait for customers. In front of the store a streetcleaner was running his broad broom along the curb. In fiction, detectives who shadowed a suspect liked to disguise themselves as streetcleaners, but the trouble with that idea was that I'd known this particular streetcleaner since before the war. The man studying the hardware display across the street was a better candidate for a shadow, though my favorite at the moment was the elderly gentleman doing nothing for a long time except sit behind the wheel of a parked car. Or there could be more than one; crooks as well as cops waiting for me to lead them to the bag.

For all I knew, I was surrounded by shadows watching every move I made. It wasn't a pleasant sensation.

When I returned from lunch, Mr. Redfern was singing the praises of the Planet convertible to a young couple who were so obviously newlyweds that they inspired benign smiles. Mr. Redfern stepped away from them and intercepted me at the office door.

"Mr. Weaver there is waiting for you," he told me.

A man was sitting deep in one of the showroom wicker chairs. He looked up at me from an illustrated Planet folder on his knees. I didn't know him.

"What does he want?"

"What do you think we sell here?"

Mr. Redfern snapped. "A car. A friend of yours gave him your name and he said he'd wait till you got back from lunch. He's been waiting half an hour already."

I hung up my hat in the office. When I returned Weaver was standing beside the four-door sedan. He was a short, slim man with a blank face. He wore his clothes too tight, and the width of his shoulders was largely padding.

"I guess you're Adam Breen," he said when I came up to him.

"You said somebody gave you my name?"

Instead of answering that, he patted a fender of the sedan. "This is a neat little job. How much?"

"Thirteen-sixty, F.O.B. Who did you say recommended me?"

He looked past me to Mr. Redfern and his two customers and then smiled up at me. "I'm wondering how much you like your wife and daughter."

It was gibberish. "What?" I said.

"I bet you'd feel pretty bad if anything happened to them," he tossed casually at me and sauntered around the hood of the car.

His voice wasn't slow and dragging. I had never heard it over the phone. There was more than one, of course — an organization. I hurried after him. He had the front right door open and his head was inside, examining the dashboard. Just another customer looking at a floor model.

"The bag?" I whispered hoarsely. "Is that what you want to know about?"

He straightened up. He didn't answer. He didn't have to. His patiently

waiting smile was enough.

"Can't I make you people believe that I don't know a thing about it?" I said.

"That's a pretty little wife you have," he observed pleasantly. "And a sweet little daughter." And he sauntered to the street door.

With a hand on the doorknob, he turned to look at me. He was giving me this last chance. I could knock him down with one blow. I could wring his neck with my two hands. And then what? Call the police and tell them: Here, arrest this man because he asked me if I cared for my wife and daughter. If anybody was arrested, I'd be the one, for assault and battery, and Mr. Redfern and the newlyweds would testify that I had started it without provocation.

I forced myself to remain where I was, and he went out, closing the door behind him. He strolled past the window with his hands in his pockets and his mouth puckered as if whistling.

Mr. Redfern strode indignantly over to me. "Why did you let a customer go out so quick?"

"What?"

"He came to buy a car. He told me. He waited for you half an hour and then you let him go in two minutes. What kind of salesmanship is that?"

"He only wanted to know prices," I muttered.

I went into the office. Mrs. Hesterberg was typing. I scooped her phone off her desk and dialed my home number. There was no answer. There usually wasn't at that time because Esther went shopping or visiting after lunch. So far there was no urgency. They were trying

to scare me into handing the bag over without fuss or trouble. Working on my nerves. That took time. They'd do that for another day or two before they started getting tough.

"Is anything wrong?" Mrs. Hesterberg asked.

I was sitting with one thigh over the corner of the desk and holding the dead phone forgotten in space. I cradled it.

"Wrong?" I said. "Everything is wonderful."

She stared at me through her harlequin glasses, and I went into the maintenance room to get away from her. The next time I called home I did it from the corner drugstore where Mrs. Hesterberg wouldn't be able to heckle me. Still no answer. And if she had been home, what would I have said to her? Lock yourself and Carol in the house and don't open the door to strangers? I unwound myself from the booth and returned to work.

Two boys hardly old enough for driver's licenses came in with money in their pockets to buy a used car. They were bright boys. They practically took three or four jalopies apart before they decided on a real buy for one-ninety. By that time it was after four. I let Mrs. Hesterberg handle the bill of sale and walked to the drugstore.

Esther's voice over the wire loosened my insides.

"How's everything, baby?" I asked, trying to make myself sound like a husband taking a few minutes off for an idle chat with his wife.

"That man—you know—who didn't call again. My heart stops beating

every time I hear the phone ring."

"Forget him. He must have found out by now he made a mistake. How's Carol?"

"I'm worried about her. She hasn't come home from school yet."

For a long moment I stopped living.

"Adam?" Esther said. "Were we cut off?"

I cleared my throat, but I couldn't get the deadness out of it. "Does she always come right home from school?"

"We've got to do something about that child. Twice last week she went straight from school to play with friends without coming home first. I tell her and I tell her, but she doesn't listen to me."

"Why don't you call the homes of her friends to see if she's there?"

"I did, those I know. But it's the beginning of the term and she's made new friends."

"I'm coming right home."

"Don't be so upset, darling. I'm sure she's all right. After all, she's done it before."

"I'll be right home," I said, and hung up.

Esther was standing on the front steps. She came down to the sidewalk to meet me.

"So she hasn't come home yet," I said woodenly.

"I told you it happened twice last week and it turned out all right."

"It's four-thirty."

"She was out till five one day last week."

"Dammit, this isn't last week!" I felt my voice crack. "It's my fault. I should

have called for her at school. I should have gone straight to the police when Weaver —"

And then I saw her. She was running toward us with a doll half her own size clutched to her chest.

"Papa, Mommy, look what I have!" she shouted when she was still several houses away.

I ran to Carol and swung her up in my arms. The doll was squeezed between us. She pulled it free and waved it at Esther.

"Mommy, look what I have."

"Carol, where were you?" Esther tried to sound stern, but there was vast relief in her tone.

"Papa's general bought me this beautiful doll."

"My what?" I said.

"Your general. Your general in the army. Don't you remember him, Papa? He said you were his bravest soldier."

"What in the world are you talking about?" Esther said.

"Papa's general. He took me for a ride in his car and bought me ice cream and bought me this doll. He paid thirteen dollars for it, Mommy."

"Can you make sense out of what she's saying, Adam?"

I held Carol closer to me. I said dully, "Let's go into the house," and I carried Carol and the doll into the living room and sat down on the couch with her on my lap.

Esther stood watching Carol remove the doll's bonnet. She was merely puzzled. She didn't know yet how frightening a doll could be.

I ran my fingers through the doll's

golden curls. "It's a lovely doll, Carol," I said. "When did you meet the general?"

"When I got out of school. He asked Betty McCarthy if she knew a girl named Carol Breen and I heard him and said I was Carol Breen and he said he was your general. Papa, he said you were his bravest soldier in France and you'd told him all about your little girl and the first chance he got he came to see me. And we got in his car —"

Esther said, anxiously now: "Carol, don't you know better than to get into a car with a strange man?"

"He wasn't a strange man, Mommy. He was Papa's general. Of course he didn't wear a uniform, but Papa doesn't wear a uniform any more either."

"Where did he take you when you got into his car?" I asked.

"He took me for an ice cream soda. He was very nice. He asked me if I wanted another soda, but I was full and I said no, thank you." She looked up at Esther for approval. "I was very polite, Mommy. I said no, thank you."

"I'm glad to hear that, dear," Esther muttered. He eyes were becoming afraid.

"Then he took me for a long, long ride in his car," Carol went on happily. "Then he took me in a toy store and let me pick out anything I wanted. Wasn't that nice of him? I picked out this doll. He paid thirteen dollars for it. Isn't that a lot of money, Papa?"

"Yes, Carol. How did he speak? I mean, did he speak very, very slowly?"

"Oh, yes, very slow. Like Dinah Jane's mother. You know how slow

Dinah Jane's mother talks, don't you, Mommy?"

"Oh, God!" Esther said.

Her face had disintegrated into a blur of tragedy. She knew now. There was no way I could have spared her.

"What happened then?" I forced myself to ask Carol.

"Then he drove me home."

"I didn't see you get out of a car."

"I got off at the corner. He was in a hurry."

This man Weaver had merely asked if I cared for my wife and daughter. He himself had merely bought a little girl ice cream and an expensive doll and then had taken her home. There had been no crime, not even an expressed threat. They were only making me die a thousand deaths.

"Adam, what does it mean?" Esther said shrilly.

I should have put my arms around her and held her to me and given her lying words of comfort. But there were still questions to ask Carol. I patted that soft little hand. "What did he look like, Carol?"

"Why, Papa, don't you know what your general looks like?"

"I had several generals. Did he tell you his name?"

Her smooth brow creased. "I don't think he did."

"Was he fat or thin? Tall or short?"

"Oh, very tall," she replied brightly.

"Taller than I am?"

"Oh, much taller. I bet he was eight feet tall."

"Tell me —" I said, and stopped.

The phone was ringing.

The crack of doom will be the ringing of a phone. Esther put her hands to her face.

"Oh, God!" she said.

I stood up. I went out to the hall and looked down at the phone and after a few seconds I picked it up.

"Breen," the dragging voice said. "This is the general speaking. How did your charming daughter enjoy my com-

pany? You won't see me next time I take her driving. Nor her either. Not for a long time, if at all. But that's up to you."

"Use your head," I said. "How can I give you something I haven't got?"

"Is that your answer?"

"I can't give you any other. Please . . ."

The line went dead.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SCAVUZZO'S SPINE RESTED on the edge of a tilted chair and his heels on the edge of a desk. He and another plain-clothes man I had seen in my house the night of the murder were listening to racing results barked out of a tiny table radio.

Scavuzzo grinned at me over his left shoulder when I asked for Lieutenant Woodfinch. "If you want a cop, Mr. Breen, I happen to be one too."

I closed the door behind me. "Somebody tried to kidnap my daughter."

"Tried?" Scavuzzo sounded as if he wished I would go away and let him listen to the racing results. "You mean a strange man gave her candy and patted her head?" He switched his grin to the other detective. "It's a funny thing about strange men, Perc. They like to give little girls candy and pat their heads. Downstairs they get a complaint a day about guys like that."

"Once I stopped to talk to a little girl," Perc said reflectively. "All I did was ask her her name and her old lady

charged out at me with a carving knife and yelled for the cops. The only thing that saved my life was I proved to her I was a cop myself."

I said in cold rage: "It was ice cream and he bought her a doll. He wasn't a stranger, although I've never seen him. He's the man who phoned me about the bag Monday night, the man who said he was Raymond Teacher's brother."

Scavuzzo's feet thumped off the desk. "Is this on the level, Mr. Breen?"

"What the hell do you think I came here for? He didn't only try. He actually did kidnap her, for about an hour and a half. Then he let her off at the corner. A little while later he phoned me and said the next time he wouldn't bring her home."

"Wait a minute." Scavuzzo reached over to click off the radio. "He told you more than that. He told you why."

I wet my lips. "He said he wanted the bag."

"So?" He looked at the other detec-

tive, then turned back to me. His mouth was tight, his eyes hard. "This is the guy you claimed killed Vital and took the bag."

"It seems I was wrong. For some reason, he thinks I have it."

Scavuzzo stood up and started past me. He stopped. "Hell, Mr. Breen, I thought at first you were handing me the usual gag to throw suspicion away from yourself. I wouldn't kid a man about his daughter being snatched."

He left the office. Perc turned on the radio. Music had replaced the staccato voice. He clicked the switch, restoring silence, and picked up a newspaper.

"Where did he go?" I burst out. "Isn't anything going to be done?"

"Hank is handling it."

"Hank?"

"Hank Scavuzzo. Sit down. You make me nervous."

I couldn't sit. I couldn't stand. I prowled the office and ate cigarettes.

Scavuzzo returned after a couple of eternities. "The lieutenant wants you to wait for him. He's eating his supper."

"Is he crazy?" I said. "My wife and daughter are home alone."

"I sent a man to watch your house. They'll be safe. How about coming along with me for a bite to eat, Mr. Breen?"

"I'd rather go home and come back in an hour."

"That'll take too long. There's a restaurant next block."

There were probably ways of keeping me in the police station for a few hours at least, so I didn't protest again. Before we left, I called Esther on one of the

office phones. I told her that the house was being guarded and that I would hang around the police station because the police thought they knew who the kidnaper was and were going to arrest him. The lie would make it easier for her to be alone at home with Carol until I returned.

In the restaurant I found that Scavuzzo wasn't a bad sort of guy when he stopped being a cop, except that after a while I realized that he hadn't stopped. He was applying technique to put me on amiable terms with him, in the hope that during the companionship of a meal I'd say something I'd be on guard to hold back in the police station. When that got him nowhere, he started to talk about kidnappings.

"Remember the Cantor case a couple of years ago?" he said. "For a week it practically took the war news off the front pages."

"I was overseas."

"Well, then, let me tell you about it. This Cantor was a dress manufacturer who lived over in Borough Park. Still does for all I know. One day he got an extortion letter in the mail. The usual thing. Shell out twenty grand if you don't want your son hurt. How old is your daughter?"

"Almost seven."

"That's about what Cantor's boy would be now. He was five then. Most of those extortion letters come from crackpots who are bluffing, but Cantor didn't take a chance. He was rich enough to hire guards, so he did. For six weeks they watched the kid day and night. But there was never a second

extortion letter and a kid can't be watched all his life, so he pulled the private detectives off the job. Two nights later the kid was snatched."

The pie I was eating turned to straw in my mouth. "While he was coming home from school?"

"Right out of his bedroom at night. Like the Lindbergh snatch. The kid slept in the nursery on the ground floor. In the morning he wasn't there. All Cantor found was a note telling where to leave twenty grand. Cantor had the dough. He didn't say a word to the police. He left the twenty grand where he was supposed to and went home to wait for his son. He waited a day and a night and then went to the police."

"Was any trace of the boy ever found?"

Scavuzzo took a hearty drink of coffee and smacked his lips. "Nobody ever saw him again. The whole country was in on the hunt, but it got nowhere. My idea is that the kid was killed even before the money was collected so the snatcher wouldn't be bothered with him. He vanished along with the money and the kidnaper. That's where it ended two years ago and that's where it still is." He sighed. "Let's go back."

Lieutenant Woodfinch arrived twenty minutes after we returned to the Homicide Squad office. He split a nod between Scavuzzo and me, hung his hat on the coat-tree, sat down behind his desk, unfolded his tobacco pouch, started carefully and methodically to load his pipe.

I couldn't stand it. "What the hell do you care about me and my family?" I

yelled at him. "You've got to eat your supper first. You've got to fill your pipe first."

Woodfinch struck a match and leaned back, his face in repose. "I'm listening, Mr. Breen."

While I told him, he puffed placidly on his pipe.

"You ought to be able to identify him without trouble," I said. "That slow voice of his and his height. My daughter described him as being a lot taller than my six-two. She said eight feet, but even considering the exaggeration of a child —."

"She didn't exaggerate by so much," Woodfinch broke in mildly. "I'd judge him at around six-seven."

"You know who he is?"

Scavuzzo, perched on the corner of a desk, said: "George Moon."

I spun toward him. "So you've known all along?"

"Sure," Scavuzzo said, grinning. "Raymond Teacher was one of George Moon's boys."

I turned back to Woodfinch. "Then why isn't he here? Why hasn't he been arrested?"

"Take it easy, Mr. Breen." Woodfinch seemed to find his pipe suddenly distasteful. He held it away from him. "What did he do? Buy your daughter ice cream and a doll. That's no crime in any book."

"You could at least have brought him here. You brought me here yesterday without any charge against me."

"I'll have a talk with him, but what do you think he'll say?"

"Who is he?"

"A crook like Raymond Teacher, only he's a big shot." He flung the pipe angrily into the ashtray — coming from him, a startling sign of emotion: "He's been operating out of Brooklyn for a long time."

"With no convictions, I bet," I said sourly.

"With a couple of suspended sentences. He's poison for a lot bigger men than you."

I dropped down into a chair and took out cigarettes. "Yesterday I'd described his voice to you—it's not a usual voice—and you knew all about Teacher, so you must have known that it was George Moon who'd phoned me Monday night and pretended to be Teacher's brother and was after the bag."

"I went to see Moon yesterday, and he—"

"Went to see him! I guess he's too important a crook to be brought to a police station like an average citizen."

"I went to see him," Woodfinch said patiently. "He denied that he'd ever heard of you or was interested in Teacher's bag or had even known that he had one. Whether or not I believed him has nothing to do with it. I'm helpless without evidence. And now it's clear that he hasn't got the bag, which means he didn't murder Vital." And he stared at me.

"Which leaves me," I said bitterly. "Only it doesn't. Why do you insist on overlooking Crooked Nose?"

"According to your own story, he was tailing you and the man you call Larry when Vital was murdered."

"How do you know just when Vital was murdered?" I argued. "It could have been right after Larry and I had left Vital alone in the garage. Crooked Nose was hanging around. Say when he saw us drive away he went into the garage and murdered Vital and took the bag. He knew about the Coney Island place Larry was taking me to, and after he had the bag he rushed after us. I was driving slowly; he could catch up to us without trouble. Or it could have happened after I knocked Larry out on McDonald Avenue. I told you I took a long way back home. Say Crooked Nose beat me back to the garage and found Vital about to leave with the bag and murdered him only a few minutes before I returned."

"Don't be silly," Woodfinch said.

"What's silly about it? It's conceivable."

"I'm talking about you being silly. Or thinking I am. I'm not a dope, and I know George Moon isn't. He's a shrewd and careful operator. He doesn't make mistakes, especially not if he's being driven to something as serious as kidnaping. There's a reason why he's so dead sure you have the bag."

"I haven't got it." I was beginning to sound like a cracked phonograph even to myself.

Woodfinch said without looking at me: "Remember the Cantor kidnaping?"

"Scavuzzo told me about it."

"Yes." Woodfinch started to unroll his pouch and suddenly dropped it and leaped to his feet. His face was livid. I gaped at him. "Damn it, Breen, what's

the matter with you? I've got two daughters of my own. I wouldn't put one of them in that kind of danger for ten pigskin bags filled with gold."

"Neither would I."

He sank back into his chair in sudden embarrassment at his outburst and picked up his pouch and pipe. His voice was quiet when he spoke again. "Give us the bag. That'll take Moon's heat off you."

"Wouldn't I give it to you now if I had it? Or to Moon? Or sell it to him if I'd been holding out for money?"

He studied me for a long time. He looked tired, but not nearly as tired as I felt.

"I don't know, Mr. Breen," he said presently. "Yesterday I couldn't make up my mind about you, but I can't see Moon acting without being sure."

"I ought to be surprised that you don't doubt that Moon threatens to kidnap my daughter."

"It could have been another one of your red herrings. I didn't have a leisurely meal, as you think, Mr. Breen. Before I came here I was at your house, talking to your wife and daughter. Your daughter especially. Children that age don't lie convincingly."

I slammed my fist down on his desk, making the ashtray jump. "Then why don't you do something about Moon? Or is he too important a crook? I've lived in Brooklyn long enough to know how big shot crooks are treated, even when they don't own the administration and the local political club. You didn't bring Moon to your office the way you did me. Not even now you don't. You

called on him with your hat in your hand. You said: 'Please, Mr. Moon, begging your pardon, but if you have a few minutes to spare, would you be terribly offended if your humble servant asked you —'

I stopped. It wasn't any use. If they had got sore or tried to cut me off, I would have let them have it with both barrels. But both of them just sat looking at me rather sadly. I suppose they didn't like it any better than I did, but they liked to hold onto their jobs.

After a silence Woodfinch spoke to his pipe. "I'd move on Moon in a minute if I had something I could make stick. The bag might give me it."

It was a merry-go-round. Words were only bringing us back to the same place.

"All right," I said, "assume that I'm a murderer and have the bag and think more of what's in it than I do of my daughter. My daughter is still entitled to police protection."

"That's not Homicide business, but we'll see that she gets it."

Scavuzzo slid off the desk and came to the side of my chair. "I'll tell you what you'll get, Mr. Breen. Your house will be watched day and night. Your daughter will be taken to school and called for. When she plays in the street, a plain-clothes man will hang around. Maybe Moon will get her even then; cops are only human. Or he'll decide to snatch your wife instead while we're guarding your daughter. Or he'll just wait. I told you about the Cantor boy. They had him guarded for six weeks, and two days after the guards were pulled off the boy was gone."

"God!" I said and leaned toward Woodfinch's desk. "Suppose I send both my wife and daughter away? I have a sister in Newark."

"It would take Moon an hour to find out where they are," Woodfinch told me. "And remember, it's not just Moon. He has an organization."

For the first time in my grown years I wanted to put my face in my hands and weep.

"I haven't got it," I said, and my voice

sounded piteous in my ears.

Woodfinch shrugged. "We'll do what we can. But if I were in your place —" He waved his pipe and restored it to his mouth.

I put on my hat.

They didn't say anything. I walked to the door.

"Don't be a damn fool, Breen," Lieutenant Woodfinch said to my back.

Without looking back at him and Scavuzzo, I went out.

CHAPTER NINE

I WALKED TOWARD home through quiet, dim streets, and considered how I could kill George Moon. There was no need to try to be clever; no matter how I worked it, Lieutenant Woodfinch would know at once that I had done it. George Moon had to die. The way to see to it that he did was to get a gun and shoot him.

I had a gun—a Germany Army Luger I'd brought home from Europe. Tomorrow I would buy cartridges for it. I would find out where he lived and wait outside his house. I had never seen him, but he would be the only man five or six inches taller than myself going in or out of that house. To make absolutely certain, I would step up to him and say: "George Moon?" And when he admitted that he was, I would take the Luger out of my pocket and put a bullet —

A terrific weight fell on me. I clawed

air and fell to my hands and knees. I looked for what had hit me and saw only a long, dark furniture warehouse on my left. I started to rise, and the toe of a shoe flashed out and kicked me in the face. It knocked me down on one shoulder.

My eyes rolled frantically in their sockets, and I saw him standing over me. Light flowed obliquely from across the street and touched his squat, solid torso and the thick, short object dangling from his hand.

"I've plenty to pay you back for, sport," he said.

I knew his voice. I lifted my head a little and looked up at Larry's broad face hideous in the shadows. Anger gave me sudden strength. I put my palms flat on the sidewalk and started to lift myself. Once I had knocked him cold in the cramped space of a car. I could do it again if I could get up to my feet.

Larry kicked me again in the face. I fell on my side.

"Let's see how tough you are, sport," he said. "Let's see how much you can take."

I saw his foot go back. My head was too heavy to lift. I pushed a forearm in front of my face, but the rest of my body was open to his foot. There was nothing I could do about it.

All at once Larry was running away. I heard a voice shout, "Hey!" and then somebody was bending over me. "You get into a fight, Mr. Breen?"

The face of the detective named Perc was inches above my own.

"That's Larry!" I said thickly.

"Who?"

"Vital's partner. For God's sake, get him!"

It took a couple of seconds for the information to work through the detective's skull. Then he said, "That guy!" and leaped to his feet.

I turned my head a little. The detective was pulling out his gun as he ran, but by that time Larry had disappeared around the corner. I tried to sit up. My stomach churned, my head spun, the whole left side of my face was numb. I lay on the sidewalk with one arm propping me up and breathed noisily through the mouth. I remained alone in the heart of Brooklyn at a still early hour of the night.

Then I realized why no other person had come by, why no heads were stuck out of windows. There were no dwellings within a hundred feet of where I lay. The warehouse covered half the block on this side, and across the street

there was a closed garage. Larry had picked his spot. And the time that had passed since he had hit me over the head could still be measured in seconds. The detective had been shadowing me and so couldn't have been far behind. It does not take long to slug a man and kick him in the face.

A car approached, swept by. I was unnoticed or ignored as a drunk. From the opposite direction a second pair of headlights crawled toward me. This car stopped at the curb. A woman got out.

"Adam Breen!" she cried and bent over me.

She was again wearing that short, belted blue coat, and the wide blue ribbon around her long bobbed hair. She got an arm under my shoulders and helped me to sit up.

"Your face!" Molly Crane said. "Who did it?"

"A guy who lay in wait for me," I told her. "He slugged me."

"But why?"

It was her job to ask questions of people who were dying or sick or hurt and then write about them in the paper. It was too much effort for me to make pointless conversation, so I didn't.

The detective was coming back. He was alone. I sat with my head against Molly Crane's hip and watched the man's quick nervous strides.

"He got away," he said irritably. "Chances are he ran into one of the apartment houses around the corner." He peered down at me. "That was Larry, you said—the one you claim was Jasper Vital's partner?"

"Now will you cops believe he's real?"

"Well, what I saw of him answered your description. A short, wide guy. Too bad I didn't know him right away. From where I was it looked like you two started to scrap. I came to break it up. I didn't know you were being slugged." The detective stooped and came up with my hat. "Crown bashed in. You were lucky you wore a hat. What'd he do to your face?"

Molly Crane said angrily: "Can't you see Mr. Breen is badly hurt? Call an ambulance."

"Yeah, and send out a prowler car alarm." He glanced around and then at Molly. "Will you stay with him while I phone?"

"Of course. But hurry. He's bleeding."

I touched my numb face and then looked at my fingers. There was less blood than I had expected. The detective was already halfway to the corner.

"Do you think you can stand?" Molly Crane asked me.

I got up to my feet with only a little help from her. My legs wobbled. She held me with a strong, competent arm about my waist.

"What's the matter with him, lady?"

A man without a collar and a woman in a cloth coat thrown over a housecoat stood on the other side of me.

"He fell and hurt himself," Molly Crane told them. "Will you please open that car door?"

The man hurried around me to pull open the door. "We live down the block," he said. "My missus saw him laying on the sidewalk and called me to go out and see."

"I thought maybe he was hit by a car," the woman said.

"He fell and hurt himself," Molly said. "Can you get into the car, Mr. Breen?"

"What about the ambulance?" I said.

Her arm pressed me forward. "Sit and wait for it in the car."

I got into the coupe under my own power. I sank low in the seat and put my head back. It felt better that way.

The car started to move, and Molly Crane said: "Why wait for an ambulance? You're not hurt that badly. I know where you live. In fact, I just came from your house."

I closed my eyes. For a while I was afraid that I would pass out. I clung to consciousness and gradually my stomach stopped jumping. It was only a three-minute ride to my house, but the car was still moving. My sense of time must have gone haywire, like in a nightmare.

Cars swished by us in surprising numbers. That was odd because cars didn't go fast enough on Brooklyn residential streets to swish and we couldn't be near any speedway. I opened my eyes. Many pairs of headlights bore down on us and swooped by. We were driving between high concrete walls. I sat up too quickly and pain nearly tore my head off.

"Where are we?"

"The Manhattan Bridge," Molly Crane said and glanced sideways at me.

This time I straightened up more slowly, and my head could take it. It was the two-way lower pass over the Manhattan Bridge all right, and ahead

I could see the Canal Street end.

"Why didn't you drive me home?"

"With you looking like that?" she said. "You'd scare your wife to death."

"Then why didn't you wait for the ambulance?"

She kept her eyes on the road. "I can clean up your face in my place."

The car went over a bump and shook me, tightening a ring of fire around my skull. I sank back. I was too exhausted to argue. And it wouldn't have done any good.

She cut across Manhattan and then drove north and stopping the car on West Fourth Street. She got out first and came around to my side. I put a foot out and carefully pushed my body after it. My head was endurable if I didn't move it suddenly. I clung to her arm. She led me into a tenement house which had been scrubbed, and chopped up into small apartments. On the stairs I smelled perfume in her hair which, unlike most women's hair, was not lower than my nose when I was standing.

Her apartment was the usual thing in renovated tenements. You stepped directly into a living room which was overcrowded by a couch and an armchair and a table and minor stuff. The kitchenette was an alcove with a curtain in front of it. The bedroom and bathroom led directly from the living room.

I sat at one end of the couch while she arranged cushions against the other arm of it. I wondered if there was a husband.

"Do you live here alone?" I asked.

She patted the cushions down. "All alone."

There was a phone on a small stand near the entrance door.

I was rousing myself to make the effort to stand up when I felt her hands on me. "Here, let me help you off with your jacket." She stripped it off, loosened my collar and eased me down on the cushions.

"The skin isn't even broken," she said. "There's only a slight bump. He must have hit you with something like a rubber sap and your hat deadened the blow. You were lucky."

She was a fine nurse, quick-moving and gentle. She fed me aspirins and washed the blood off my face and cleaned the cuts on my cheek. I winced when her probing fingers touched the sore spot on the back of my skull.

"I mean it," she said. "You say he kicked you twice, but there isn't anything broken in your face. Only a nasty bruise and a couple of cuts. I suppose you rolled with the kicks."

"I don't remember. He probably wanted to put his foot through my face. Can I have a drink?"

"Water or coffee. Hard stuff won't help your headache."

"Coffee," I said.

I lay flat on my back with my face turned to her as she pattered in the kitchenette. She wore a beige jersey dress which blended with her honey-brown hair and molded her figure. She could have got a job anywhere for a Greek goddess or an Amazon queen.

I shifted my eyes to the phone. I felt strong enough to go to it. I didn't move. I closed my eyes, and suddenly I was asleep.

CHAPTER TEN

WHEN I AWOKE, the overhead light was out and only a subdued floorlamp spread a soft glow from one corner of the room. Molly Crane sat in the armchair. She held a tall, half-empty glass on her crossed knee. Her face was as immobile and classic as marble. I thought that she was as beautiful as any woman I had ever seen.

She saw me lift my wrist to look at my watch. "You've slept nearly two hours," she said. "Feel better?"

"Much. A nap always does wonders for me."

I stood up. My legs were all right and my head had felt worse during bad headaches. I walked as far as the phone and looked down at it and came back to the couch.

"Aren't you going to call your wife?" she said.

"No."

"She must be worried about you."

"Did you call her?" I asked.

"I wanted to while you slept, but I decided that she'd think you were terribly hurt if anybody phoned for you. Do you mean to say you're going to let her worry? The police must have told her what happened."

I sat with my hands between my knees. "I'm not going home. You've got to help me disappear."

Her gray eyes looked me over. She said nothing.

I laughed harshly. "No, not with the bag. You're wasting your time believing I know anything about it or who murdered Jasper Vital. There's nothing I

can tell you to make it worth the trouble you've taken to kidnap me."

She lifted her highball, sipped it, returned it to her knee. "Is that what I did?"

"You stole me from the detective and the ambulance. You saw a chance to bring me to your apartment while I was sick and groggy. I'd talk to you in delirium, or because I wouldn't have the strength to hold out against your questions, or because I would be overwhelmed by your kindness."

"Naturally I want a story," she admitted.

"You were kind, though," I said. "You patched me up and let me sleep. I'd like to give you something for your paper, but there isn't anything. You can't even print that George Moon tried to kidnap my daughter for a little while this afternoon. I can't prove that he was the one."

"So it was George Moon?" she said quietly. "Your wife didn't know."

I looked at her. "That's right, you told me you were at my house."

"I'm a newspaper woman," she said. "I don't give up. This evening I went to see you. You had left a short time before. Your wife was glad to have somebody to talk to. She told me what had happened to your daughter this afternoon. Then I drove to the police station to see if they had anything for me there, but I never reached it. I saw a man lying on the sidewalk." She drank. "I saw your daughter. She's lovely, and so much like you."

"Like me?" I said. "Part of me." I walked across the room and back. "When I left the police station this evening, I made up my mind to kill George Moon. I didn't care about being caught as long as that would save them. Now I'm not sure that I could step up and kill any man in cold blood. And if I could, I'm not sure I'd accomplish anything. A lot of different people seem to want that bag. They wouldn't lay off because Moon is dead, and neither will his organization."

"There wouldn't be much organization without Moon," Molly said.

"Do you know him?"

"I've heard of him. In my job I know something about most of his kind. He's smart and ruthless and politically powerful."

"What's his racket?"

"He'll put his hand to anything that's crooked and pays off."

I paced the floor. "Then it's the only way. I've got to make him think I've been kidnaped."

"By me?" she said softly.

"By Larry and a mysterious woman."

A shadow flickered across her red mouth. "Go on."

I said: "Look at it through the eyes of the police first. The detective who shadowed me left me battered in the arms of an unknown woman while he went to call an ambulance." I frowned at her. "Does he know you?"

"I'm sure he's never seen me before."

"Good. When he returned, he found me gone and the woman and her car gone. He reported me missing and police rushed to my house to see if I'd

gone there. Then a hunt started for me — one that's going on this minute."

She leaned forward. The floorlamp caught her eyes and the flecks of yellow in them glittered. "And when you don't turn up tomorrow, the police will start to wonder why you've disappeared."

"They'll be pretty sure why and how. They'll now have to accept the existence of Larry. Enough of him was seen by the detective who chased him to jibe with the description of him I'd given. At first thought it would seem that Larry had beaten me up to pay me back for having knocked him out Monday evening. But he's out for more than revenge; he's after the bag and whatever information he thinks I possess. And there's the mysterious woman who stole me away. Lieutenant Woodfinch puts the pieces together and gets something like this. Larry's had one bad experience being alone in a car with me. This time he has an accomplice, a woman waiting nearby in a car. His idea is to slug me and toss me unconscious and harmless into the car. The detective comes on the scene too soon, but the woman is clever. She gets rid of him by sending him to call an ambulance. While he's gone, she lures me into her car, and I'm too battered and dazed to know what's happening as she drives me off. The proof that she did that is furnished by the man and woman who saw me virtually dragged into the car by her. And now I'm in Larry's hands, delivered to him by the mysterious woman. And at this moment Larry must be working on me with his knife to induce me to talk."

"Neat, if a trifle gaudy," Molly commented and took a small sip of her highball. "A police alarm already must be out for me."

"Why for you? For a mysterious woman. You told me the detective didn't know you."

"But he saw me."

"He saw a woman, that's all. The street was dark. I doubt if he got a good look at your face or knows the make of your car. As for the man or the woman, they saw even less of you. I was leaning against you. Only a patch of your face was visible, and hardly visible at that."

"All right, I'm safe," she conceded, "and the police are sure Larry kidnaped you. What does that get you?"

I ran a hand through my hair and touched a sore spot on my scalp and winced. She held the glass in front of her chin and watched me gravely over the rim.

"This is all directed at George Moon," I said. "The police will give the story of my kidnaping out to the papers and he'll read it. Or if they hold it back, he'll find out anyway. I think he has ways of learning whatever the police know."

"You can take my word for it that Moon has wires into high places."

"Then tomorrow morning at the latest he learns I'm gone. He'll be even more sure than Lieutenant Woodfinch that Larry has kidnaped me. He knows Larry. Vital and Larry were part of his organization in the south. During the ride Larry told me that he and Vital came north because they were

tired of working for peanuts. What's in the pigskin bag must be part of what they're after. Moon knows it and knows that Larry is still after it. So he is convinced that Larry has me, which is the whole point of my disappearance."

Molly uncrossed her legs and rolled her glass between her palms. "And Moon will leave your wife and daughter alone because while you're in Larry's hands he can't scare you into giving up the bag. Or he'll think you're dead because Larry would likely kill you when he got what he wanted out of you."

"Yes." I stood in front of her chair and looked down at her. "You're a newspaper reporter. You've had more experience with such things. What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing very much. Except that your wife will go crazy worrying about you."

"I know." I felt sick again, not now because of the beating I had taken. "What else can I do? I've got to divert Moon from Carol and Esther."

"Call her up and tell her not to say that she'd heard from you."

I turned to the phone and looked at it. "I can't take the chance," I said hollowly. "The wires might be tapped by the police or by both. Or Esther might confide in somebody, a friend or a relative, and it will get out. It will be hard on her, but not as hard as anything happening to Carol. Eventually I'll be back." I looked down at Molly. "It depends on you."

"What do you want me to do?"

"It's simple. Just don't tell anybody you're the mysterious woman."

Molly stood up and said: "Let's have some coffee."

I sat on one of the two maple chairs at the table and watched her as she spooned fresh coffee into a small electric percolator. She placed the percolator on the table, plugged it in, returned to the kitchenette for dishes, and sugar and cream. She looked like too much woman for any man but a big man—big, I thought, in more than size.

When the table was set, she sat down opposite to me and rested her chin on her fist. "Where will you go?" she asked.

"I've around forty-five dollars on me. I'll use part of it to get me far enough away so that I won't be recognized. I'll get a job under an assumed name."

"And then?" she said. "After a month, or two months, or a year?"

"I don't know. What's the use planning if you don't tell me that you are not going to give me away?"

The coffee started to percolate. She looked at her wristwatch. She was wearing those double earrings like wedding rings and they tinkled when she lifted her head. "You haven't been on the level with me."

"I've tried to be."

"No. I've had the police handouts on the case and I've picked up a little here and there myself, but there are a lot of gaps."

"I can't fill them in," I said, "but I can let you have what I know."

It seemed to be less every time I told it. She sat listening impassively, her gray

eyes fixed on my face without blinking.

When I finished, she said: "That's what's wrong. Moon is sure you have the bag. He'd have reason to be sure."

"You sound like Lieutenant Woodfinch."

"I sound like anybody who listens to you. And who killed Jasper Vital?"

"Whoever has the bag?"

"Moon hasn't it. Larry hasn't it. Your idea that Crooked Nose got it just before or after tailing you and Larry is too far-fetched. Whom does that leave?"

"Maybe somebody I never even heard of," I said. "Esther's name and address were in the paper. Anybody could have learned that Teacher's bag had remained in the car. The coffee is getting too strong."

"Forty seconds more," she said, consulting her watch. "There's just one clue—the Tilly's place Larry mentioned to you. Maybe a beer joint in Brooklyn."

"Badley Place," I corrected her. "I'm not sure it's Badley, but close to it. He asked me if I knew Tilly in Badley —" I stopped.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Tilly's place," I said slowly. "Was it Tilly's place in Badley instead of Tilly in Badley Place? So then Badley wouldn't be a place or a street, but a community. That makes more sense."

Molly disconnected the percolator and poured coffee. "I never heard of Badley."

I sat staring at the rich brown liquid pouring into my cup. "I'm still wrong. During that ride with Larry I wasn't in a state of mind to remember exactly what he said. But I remember now that

he didn't mention Tilly and Badley together. There was an interval." I spoke very slowly, straining to send my memory back. The dull pain in my skull became a throbbing. "He asked me about Tilly. What's happening there? What's doing there? Something like that. He was after information. When I told him I'd never heard of Tilly, he didn't believe me. He said he knew they were working in the Badley place now."

I looked up eagerly. "That's it—working in the Badley place. As if there were a number of places and one of them was in a town called Badley."

Molly went to a tall, narrow bookcase only half-filled with books. "I've an old atlas which has an index of every city and village in the country." She returned with a wide yellow book. She pushed the sugar bowl out of the way and placed the atlas flat on the table and turned pages and then bent her head.

"There's no Badley," she announced.

"I was never sure it was Badley. What places begin with B-a-d?"

"Well, here's a Bade and a lot of Badens and Badgers and Badham and Badin and Badmont and . . ."

"Badmont!" I exclaimed.

She looked up from the atlas, and for the first time she caught some of my excitement. "Are you sure?"

"Badmont. I'm like a man who's had amnesia. You mention a familiar name and it all comes back. I'm positive. Where is it?"

"New Jersey." She tossed the atlas on the armchair. "I've driven through it. It's in northwestern New Jersey. Copper

mines, I think." She stirred her coffee. "So what? Somebody named Tilly in Badmont. You know more than that. You know somebody named George Moon in Brooklyn."

I didn't reply. I drank my coffee down black without sugar and poured myself a second cup. She was not a gabbling woman; she knew when a man wanted to be alone with his thoughts. She sat watching me as if waiting for something to happen. After a while she rose to clear the table. I lit the last cigarette in my pack and watched the smoke drifting away from my face.

She came out of the kitchenette and stood beside my chair with her legs apart, like a man. Her hands would have been in her pockets, if she had had pockets. "What are you cooking up, Adam?"

I stubbed out my cigarette. "I'm going to Badmont tomorrow."

Molly nodded as if she had expected that. "And what do you think you'll do there?"

"Running away is no good," I said. "I don't know how far I'll have to run or how long, and what will happen to Carol and Esther while I'm gone. I know what it is to be away from them. I had too much of it in the army. I'm going to fight back."

"What are you going to fight in Badmont?"

"Whatever is there," I said. "Find the bag or learn who has it, or why it's so valuable, or who killed Jasper Vital, or anything else that will help me get out from under. Something ought to be there. Larry was almost as interested

in Tilly and the Badmont place as in the bag. I think it's some kind of headquarters, probably Moon's."

"If it's Moon's headquarters, where does that get you? You know Moon doesn't have the bag."

I was pulling the empty cigarette pack apart, not looking at Molly, but at what my hands were doing. "Moon hasn't got it and Larry hasn't got it, but somebody has it who knew its value, and that Raymond Teacher was carrying it when the car struck him. That means somebody in Moon's organization or close to it. It's possible that Vital and Larry weren't the only ones to decide to doublecross Moon."

"You're groping in the dark, Adam."

"What can you do in the dark but grope? I'm leaving town anyway. I've nothing to lose by going to Badmont."

"Except perhaps your life," she said dryly.

"What the hell, there's always danger in a fight." I flattened the empty cigarette pack wrapper. "Not so much danger if I just go to Badmont and look around. Moon never saw me. As far as I know, only one member of his gang ever did — Weaver, the guy who came to the showroom this afternoon. There's Crooked Nose, but I don't know where he fits in, for or against Moon. The odds are that the Brooklyn people won't come up to Badmont while I'm there."

Molly walked away from me as if she had lost interest in the conversation. She picked up the highball she had left on the end table, but she didn't raise it to her mouth.

"Okay, Adam, a mysterious woman

stole you from the detective, and they'll never learn from me who it really was."

She turned to me with the rich, warm smile that had made a hard-boiled desk sergeant simper. "And you might as well spend the night here on the couch."

"You're swell," I said.

"No, I'm just a sucker for tall lads with cowlicks." She put down the glass. "I don't know how you feel, but I can use some sleep."

She brought a sheet and a blanket and a pillow out of the bedroom. When she had arranged them on the couch, she eyed the result dubiously. "You'll never fit on it."

"I'm used to cramped beds," I said. "Thanks a lot."

She went as far as the bedroom door and turned and looked at me a long time with those unblinking gray eyes. She had two faces, one which glowed with the warmest smile on earth and the other frozen and remote. Whenever she stared at me like that, something inside of me squirmed. She was, I thought, a little screwy.

"Good-night," she said suddenly and stepped into the bedroom.

I stripped down to my underwear and put out the light and climbed under the blanket. I lay between the two arms of the couch with knees raised. The glow of a street lamp spread up through the two windows and revealed the phone not ten feet from where I lay. It was close to two o'clock. Esther would still be up, waiting to hear from the police that they found me. And tomorrow she would wait, and the day after. And Carol, who had known so little of me

except for this last year, would wait.

I heard Molly move about in her room. The slit of light under the closed bedroom door vanished and a moment later bedsprings creaked. I closed my eyes. There was no sleep for me, because of the nap or the two cups of coffee or the tumult in my brain.

I got out of bed and went into the kitchenette and drank water. Then I wanted a cigarette. I had smoked my last one, but Molly would have some around. She hadn't, not in that room. I found myself staring down at the phone. I stuck my finger into the dial hole which would start the connection to my home. Savagely I turned away and felt that I would tear things apart if I didn't have a cigarette.

I put on my pants and tapped lightly on the bedroom door. There was no response. I pushed the door open, and by the light which flowed from the living room I saw Molly lying in a maple bed with her bare arms over the cover and her face soft and relaxed in sleep. Her handbag was on the maple dresser, and beside it lay an ashtray and a pack of cigarettes and matches. It was a very small room. Five steps took me across. I reached for the cigarettes.

"What do you want?" Molly said sharply.

I spun toward the bed as guilty as a man caught with his hand in somebody else's pocket. She was sitting up. Her left hand reached sideways to snap on the bedside lamp. Her right hand held a small pearl-handled automatic.

The depreciating laugh which started in my throat came out as a nervous

giggle. "I wanted to borrow a cigarette," I explained.

"Yes?" she said.

She wore a peach nightgown with almost no bodice. An Amazon queen beyond doubt, and the gun was an adequate modern substitute for a spear. She held it pointed at me, competently.

I said: "Do you always sleep with a gun under your pillow?"

"I do when there's a strange man sleeping in my apartment and I've lost the key to the bedroom door."

I shook my head. "You wouldn't have any reason to be afraid of me except if I'm somebody who murdered a man a couple of nights ago and stole a valuable bag. If I'm capable of that, there's no telling what I'm capable of with only an unlocked door between myself and a beautiful woman in bed."

She looked down at the gun and at herself, and she spoiled the picture somewhat by pulling the blanket up to her bare shoulders. The gun lowered to her thigh and she smiled. Not her de luxe smile. This one hardly plucked the corners of her mouth. "I think you're what you pretend to be, a respectable lad who blundered into something too big for him, but I prefer to play safe. You might want to make sure that I wouldn't be able to tell anybody how you really disappeared to-night."

"But you invited me to spend the night here."

"I felt sorry for you," she said. "And I feel safe enough with a gun. A newspaper reporter sometimes goes places where it is convenient to be armed."

"Sorry I disturbed your sleep," I said stiffly and turned to go.

"You were supposed to have come for cigarettes," she called after me. I wasn't sure that her voice was mocking.

I returned to the dresser and shook two cigarettes from the pack and went

to the door. She sat against the headboard with the cover held to her throat and the gun on her thigh.

Her gray eyes showed nothing that was behind them.

"Good-night," I said and closed the door between us.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MY WRISTWATCH SAID five minutes to nine. Sun streamers filtered in through dusty windows and lay across the rug and touched my bare feet propped up on the arm of the couch. I turned my cheek against the pillow and looked at the phone on its table on the other side of the room. It had waited all night for me.

The bedroom door was open. I could see the rumpled empty bed. I didn't hear her in the bathroom. I lay on the couch and looked at the phone.

A key turned in the lock. Molly Crane came in with a couple of packages. She wore a suit of brown-and-white checks, and many men would have envied those broad shoulders and the tall, erect carriage. But there was nothing mannish about the way her copper-colored jersey sweater molded her fine breasts.

"I let you sleep while I went down for rolls," she explained. "How do you feel this morning?"

I pulled my bare feet out of sight under the blanket. "Physically I'm all right. I've been thinking about the wild ideas I had last night."

She glanced at the phone as if it could tell her something. "So you phoned your wife?"

"Not yet, but I'm going to."

"That's up to you." Molly placed the bag of rolls on the table and turned back to me with a small package wrapped in blue paper. "I had a look at the morning papers while I was downstairs. There wasn't a thing about you. Then I phoned my paper and I learned that a story had gone on the wire a couple of hours ago. I guess the police waited until they'd spent the night hunting for you before they gave anything to the press."

"What did they give out?"

"Witness in Brooklyn murder vanishes. Believed kidnaped. That was what you wanted, wasn't it?"

"Yes." I turned my face from the phone. "Esther is sitting at home waiting, not knowing if I'm dead or alive. It's a terrible thing to do to her."

She waited for me to go on. When I didn't, she dropped the small package on my blanket and said: "I bought you a toothbrush and a razor and shaving

"You're swell."

Her shoulder-length hair swung with the tossing of her head. "Better save it till you're sure you mean it. I'll turn my back till you dress." She went into the kitchenette.

I gathered up my clothes and the package, and in my underwear sprinted into the bathroom. A hot shower and a shave set me up and made me look presentable—or almost so, for the bruise on my cheek had darkened and produced a thuggish effect. It hurt only when I pressed my finger against it.

When I came out, breakfast was ready. I sat down opposite Molly and drank canned grapefruit juice.

"I'm going through with it," I said, putting the glass down.

"I was sure you would. You made too many arguments last night not to have convinced yourself. We ought to get an early start."

"We?" I said.

She flashed that dazzling smile of hers. "I told you not to thank me for anything I did for you. I was thinking of myself when I brought you here and let you spend the night. I'm a newspaper woman."

"It might be dangerous."

"It might be for you, but I'll merely be an outsider looking in. This is my chance to get the whale of a story I've been after."

"No," I said.

"I've been around, Adam. I know a little something about criminals. Possibly I could be of help."

"I've taken enough favors from you. This is my job."

Her head dipped as she leaned across the table to pour my coffee. "Get it out of your head that I've done you any favors, or will. All the help I want is to help myself to an exclusive story." She sat back and the gold in her eyes sparkled. "You can't stop me. My car is downstairs; I've already taken it out of the garage. I can beat you to Badmont. You can go with me or meet me there."

I drank my coffee, thinking it over, and then laughed mildly. "You're quite a woman."

"I've been told that."

"I don't only mean physically."

"I've been told that too. Would you like another slice of toast?"

Twenty minutes later we left in her car. She drove all the way.

We were like the bear climbing over the mountain. When we reached the other side there was always another mountain, or a rib of the same mountain, and between the ribs lay rolling valleys. Occasionally we saw a farmhouse in the distance, but not often. Once we passed a bearded man trudging along the road. For the rest, the valleys belonged to grazing cows.

Shortly before noon Molly stopped the car just after we had started another descent. "There it is."

I looked up from the New Jersey road map spread on my knees. Below us houses were scattered along the farther side of the valley.

I said: "It looks too placid for Brooklynites. We can't stand a place where there aren't crowds, and that goes double for Brooklyn gangsters."

"They must have reason to want to

be where it's placid." She drove on.

My stomach muscles tightened. We were very close now. I folded the map and opened the door of the glove compartment. Her copper-colored alligator handbag, to match her jersey sweater, was in there. I pulled the bag out a little way to shove the map under it.

The car jolted to a halt. Molly leaned hard against my side, snatched the handbag, and placed it on her left side, between her hip and the door. Then she released the hand brake and shifted the rolling car into high.

I said: "So that's where you keep your gun?"

"You can hardly expect me to wear a holster."

"And you don't trust me near it," I said. "You still don't trust me at all."

She brushed away hair which was blowing across her face. "We'll get along better if we don't expect too much from each other."

"Suits me," I grunted. I would have enjoyed slapping her.

In Badmont we found two blocks of bustling stores and filling stations. Like all towns in an area of widely scattered population, it served the people who lived far beyond the town limits. Molly pulled up in front of a white stucco post office.

"Well, there's Tilly Atchison," a little old woman behind the window grill told us in answer to our question. "Only his real name in Tilford Atchison, though everybody calls him Tilly. Is that who you're looking for?"

"What does he do for a living?" I asked.

She pursed bloodless lips. "Lives on his daughter Louise, that's what Tilly Atchison does for a living. I've known him forty years if I've known him a day, but he never as much as lifted a finger to. . ."

Molly said: "Is there anybody named Matilda?" She had taken out a plastic compact the size of a coffee saucer and was dabbing powder on her face.

The woman stuck her face against the grill to get a full view of Molly. Obviously she didn't approve of attractive young women renewing their faces in her post office. "This gentleman wants a Tilly," she told Molly severely.

"Tilly is short for Matilda," Molly explained.

"You don't say?" the postmistress mullied over the information. "There's Matilda Ames, but she lives over in York State."

"Yes?"

"York State," the postmistress said firmly, putting a foreigner in his place. "It's just past the ridge. Folks who live on the other side of the state line come to Badmont for their mail because we're the nearest post office. Matilda Ames doesn't come herself. I reckon she's too fat to move much. She sends her man Milton — I don't know his other name — never gets mail sent to him. He comes twice a week to pick up mail for Matilda Ames and to buy food for the lunchroom and sometimes . . ."

"She runs a lunchroom?" I asked.

"Owns it. Owns a used car place too."

"How do we get there?"

"Keep on this road. Right inside

York State. You can't miss the place."

When we were outside, Molly said: "It could be that old man, Tilford Atchison, who hasn't any visible means of support, but let's try Matilda Ames first. Especially as she runs a lunchroom and I'm hungry."

"It was clever of you to think of Tilly as Matilda."

She pulled open the car door and slid behind the wheel without acknowledging the compliment. I noticed that she again placed her handbag on her left side, out of my reach.

We climbed another mountain and saw a road marker which announced that we were passing from New Jersey into New York. A couple of hundred feet beyond there was a long two-story house covered with gray asbestos shingles. Two small signs hung over the double door. One said, "EATS," and the other said, "TOURISTS." At the side of the house two birch logs were set on either side of a cinder driveway entrance. The posts were connected by an arched wooden sign which said: "BEST USED CAR BARGAINS IN THE EAST."

Molly pulled up to the narrow parking area in front of the house. She remained behind the wheel to retie her broad blue hair ribbon. I got out and walked to the corner of the house and had a look at the used car lot. The cars stood in rows of twenty or so, and then there was a broad empty space, and then a big red barn at the foot of a hill. Some of the cars were obviously jalopies, but from what I could see at that distance most of them were A-1 buys.

"Looking for something?" a man asked.

He had come out of a side door. He was a wizened man in blue denim overalls several sizes too large for his gnarled frame. A corn cob pipe was clamped in a mouth so thin that he appeared to have no lips. His chin fell away to almost nothing.

"Just stretching my legs," I told him, and turned back to the car.

Molly was removing a medium-sized airplane bag from the car trunk. As I went up to her, she shut and locked the trunk.

"What's in that bag?" I asked.

"You can't expect a girl to go anywhere overnight without taking a bag along."

"I didn't see you pack it."

"I packed it while you were asleep and brought it down to my car when I went for rolls." She lifted the bag. "And if you don't mind, don't speak to me as if you were my husband."

I said: "You had it all arranged while I was still asleep. Sometimes you let me make up my own mind, but only when it agrees with your plans."

Abruptly she turned on her smile and patted my cheek. I couldn't decide whether to knock her hand away or purr. "You're sore about the gun, Adam."

"That's only part of it," I said. "You're just supposed to be tagging along, but I have a feeling that it's the other way around."

She gave my cheek another appeasing pat and tucked a hand through my arm. I remembered my manners and took

the bag from her.

The lunchroom must once have been the living room of a private home. There was hardly enough space for a short counter, a wirelegged table and four wire chairs. Behind the counter there was a single coffee urn streaked with rust, a fly-specked mirror no bigger than a bathroom mirror, a four-burner gas range, a short workbench which needed scraping, a refrigerator that couldn't have served more than a moderately sized family. And a fat woman.

Her eyes swept over us and stopped at the bag I carried. "If you're tourists, I'm all filled up."

"So early?" I said.

"What's the difference how early it is if I've no room?"

"Well, we can at least have lunch here." Molly moved to the counter.

I put down the bag and we sat on two of the five high stools. The only sign of food was two anemic pies in a glass case. It was still lunch hour, but the place was empty except for us. I could understand that. Ordinarily I would have made a wide circuit to avoid eating here.

"You can have apple pie and coffee," the fat woman said.

"Is that all you have?" Molly asked.

"Take it or leave it." She had a positive hatred of doing business.

"We'll take it," Molly said.

The fat woman removed one of the pies from the case. She was built low to the ground. Her face looked like a lump of dough thrown on a table. Underneath her three or four chins she had a bosom which would crowd a small

room. You expected a woman like that to be slovenly, but she wasn't. Her gray-streaked hair was neatly gathered back. She wore no apron. Her dress didn't belong behind a lunchroom counter; it was black crepe with long white beads around the collar, and it looked prosperous.

Molly lit a cigarette and pushed the pack over to me. "Are you Tilly?" she asked conversationally.

The fat woman turned from the urn with two steaming cups in her pudgy hands. "So what?"

"This place was recommended to us in Badmont."

The pale eyes buried in fleshy sockets narrowed. "For eating?"

Molly chuckled. "For sleeping. Somebody in Badmont told us that Tilly had tourist accommodations."

"Well, I'm all filled up."

The fat woman set the cups before us and served us two slabs of pie. The best that could be said for the coffee was that it was hot; the pie was mush between cardboard. I had no appetite, anyway. Here was a woman named Tilly, but she wasn't even in the same state as Badmont. In fact, I was no longer sure that Larry had said Badmont. I had a depressing feeling that I was getting nowhere slowly.

"We'd be willing to pay a little extra to be put up for the night," Molly was saying.

The fat woman placed both hands on the counter and looked us over carefully. "Why?" she said.

"Because we have to sleep some-

The fat woman shook her head. "It's too early. Before it gets dark you can do plenty of traveling to wherever you're going."

"For the same reason it's too early in the day for a tourist house to be filled," Molly said. "That's why I'm hoping you can find room for us if we pay you well."

"I'm all filled up."

I had let Molly carry the ball since we had entered, and she hadn't moved an inch. Now it was my turn. I said:

"Raymond Teacher told me to come here."

On my left I heard somebody stir. I looked over my shoulder. The wizened man in blue denims stood sucking his corn-cob pipe in a doorway leading into a hall.

He removed his pipe from his lipless mouth.

"Ray's dead."

Knots tightened in my stomach. I was here.

CHAPTER TWELVE

TILLY FINGERED ONE OF the long white beads on her collar. "Ray Teacher is too dead to send anybody anywhere."

"Ray is dead only since Monday." I abandoned trying to get the coffee down. "Of all the crummy luck, to get knocked off by a car while crossing a street. He was a swell guy."

The wizened man in the hall doorway snickered. "I heard Ray Teacher called lots of things, but nobody never called him a swell guy."

First mistake, the penalty of saying more than enough. I picked up the pieces in a hurry. "I mean he was swell to me. I was flat broke. He lent me some dough and told me he thought there was a job for me and that next time he came up here he'd bring me along."

"What's your name?" Tilly asked.

I was prepared for that one. "Thomas Rover."

"Never heard of you."

"Lots of people haven't."

"Who's the girl?"

I waited for Molly to take it. She continued to eat the pie as if it had taste. I said: "My wife. Her name is Madge."

Molly's head lifted an inch and dipped an inch. She didn't look at me.

Tilly ran a thick forefinger across her mouth. On the finger there was a vast floral-shaped monstrosity of white diamonds and rubies and sapphires in a platinum setting. It was hardly what you would expect a hash-slinger to wear behind the counter.

"So you saw Ray?" she said reflectively. "When?"

"A few days ago."

"What day?"

The trap yawned. Raymond Teacher might have been here on a day I mentioned, and then she would know that all the rest was a lie too.

"Monday, wasn't it?" I said to Molly,

giving myself a chance to contradict her if it became necessary.

"Monday morning," she told Tilly blandly. "It was Monday evening that we heard he'd been run over. We dropped up to Ray's apartment in the Bronx. We'd known him out west, but he wasn't ready to lend us dough. Then Ray got an idea and asked Tom if he wanted to work for George Moon and Tom said sure. That's when he let us have a hundred bucks. He told us he'd get in touch with us in few days. Then a few hours later he was killed."

Too many details, I thought, and waited tensely. Details were necessary, but dangerous when you had to take long guesses. We knew that Teacher had lived in the Bronx only because the newspaper story which had told about the accident had said so. But maybe that was wrong, or he hadn't a regular apartment there, or Tilly knew that he hadn't been in the Bronx at all Monday morning.

Tilly slid her pale eyes from Molly to me. "Did Ray leave with a bag?"

"I wouldn't know," I said. "We left before he did. What kind of bag?"

"Didn't he tell you about it?"

"He didn't do much talking. He didn't even tell me what kind of job. When we heard he was dead, we decided it was all off. Then last night Madge remembered that Ray had said that the job would likely be at Tilly's place in Badmont. We'd never heard of Tilly or Badmont, but we had nothing to lose by looking."

"What do you do?"

I tried not to hesitate, but I did. "I'm

pretty handy with a gat."

The wizened man uttered a derisive sound. "Trigger-men are a dime a dozen. We don't need 'em. Jasp Vital's dead and we'll handle Larry Goodby if he shows his face. The boss is taking care of the guy in Brooklyn who's got the bag. A guy named Breen. If the guy don't hand over the bag, George will snatch his . . ."

"Shut up, Milton," Tilly said.

"Huh? Yeah." Milton stuck his pipe back into his chinless face.

"Are you handy with anything beside a gun?" Tilly asked me.

"Sure." I wondered what I ought to be handy with and remembered the used car lot behind the house. "I'm a cracker-jack car mechanic."

Surprisingly, that brought a satisfied nod from Tilly. And Milton said: "Yeah, we're short-handed. Rufus can use a good one when he starts going again."

"Well, I'm a good one," I said. "But I'm not working for a mechanic's pay."

"No?" Tilly stepped back from the counter and leaned her broad hips against the gas range. "What are you working for?"

"You tell me."

She didn't. She jabbed a fat thumb at Molly. "Why were you trying to spend the night here without telling me what you'd come for?"

"We weren't too sure that this was the place Ray Teacher meant," Molly muttered. Her profile looked suddenly tired. Harsh lines had appeared at the corner of her mouth.

Tilly returned her attention to me.

"You say you come from out west. Where? Who do you know there? What did you do?"

There were too many questions, and any one of them was dynamite. I assumed anger. "Why should I tell you anything? All I know is that you're selling cardboard pie in a moth-eaten lunchroom. Ray said I'd work for George Moon. I'll do my talking to him."

"He ain't here," Milton informed me. "He's in Brooklyn working on that guy Breen who has the bag."

"Shut up, Milton." Tilly waddled to the tap, poured herself a glass of water, drained it at a gulp, wiped her mouth with the flat of her hand. Then she said almost amiably: "Tough guy, huh?"

I saw myself in the fly-speckled mirror behind the counter. The bruise on my cheek gave me a sinister aspect. I experimented with a leer, and it looked passable and I turned it on Tilly. "I'm tough enough to want to tie up with George Moon, but not unless there's enough in it for me."

"There'll be enough. I don't know when George will be back."

"We're willing to hang around if you have a place for us to sleep," I said.

She reached under the counter and brought up a hotel register. "We're licensed as a hotel. Everything has to be legal. If you have a record, use a phony name."

"This name will do." I took the pen from her.

Molly leaned against my shoulder and watched me write in the register: "Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Rover, New York."

When I put down the pen, she slid off the stool. Listlessly she pulled down her sweater and tucked her handbag under her arm. Somehow she seemed not as tall and straight as a few minutes ago.

"Milton, show them up to the double room," Tilly said.

He faded into the hall. I picked up Molly's bag. The hall ran the remaining length of the house to a side entrance at the far end. Halfway up the hall there was a staircase. We started to climb it.

"Tom," Tilly called.

I ascended two more steps before I remembered. I turned and saw Tilly at the foot of the stairs.

"I'm letting you stay till George comes because I think we can use you," she said. "But you keep your nose clean till George says you're okay. Don't snoop. Get it?"

"Sure." I went on.

Molly was following Milton into one of the rooms strung out on either side of the hall. It wasn't a bad room. You could turn around in it without hitting anything and the paper with the red roses on the walls wasn't more than a dozen years old. There were two windows and a double bed which looked softer than the floor and a dresser with tarnished gilt drawer handles and two chairs, one with a cracked leather seat.

Milton said: "Bring you towels later. The bathroom is down at the end of the hall." He emitted an old man's dry snicker. "Hope you can stand the food Tilly dishes out."

"Does she make real meals?" I asked.

"For the boys. If you can call 'em

meals." He pulled on his corn cob and contemplated Molly's legs. She was standing at one of the windows with her back to us.

I said: "What's that bag you were telling us about downstairs?"

"Well, Ray was carrying it when he got clipped by the car. This guy Breen's wife took Ray to the hospital and held onto the bag."

"Was there anything valuable in it?"

Milton rolled the pipestem inside his mouth. He started to take the stem out to speak.

"Mil-ton!" Tilly called from downstairs.

"That dame runs me to a rag," he explained cheerfully and left.

I watched the door close behind him and silently cursed Tilly. But the chance wasn't lost beyond recall. He liked to talk. I'd get him aside as soon as I could.

"Tom Rover!" Molly said. She had turned from the window and was wearily stripping off her jacket. "The Rover Boys at Tilly's, or Murder for Kiddies."

"It's a name."

"And so is Madge a name. Madge Rover. God!" She tossed the jacket on the bed and curled her lips. "And a double bed. Remember you're a Rover boy, so don't go getting ideas about that bed."

I could hand it back when I had to. "I didn't ask you to come along. There wasn't any way I could explain you to Tilly except as my wife. Don't flatter yourself that there was any other reason. I'll sleep on a chair or on the floor or standing up."

"You're damn right you will!"

She was too much for me. In the few hours I had known her she had been aggressive and remote, gay and sullen, garrulous and wordless. Now still another mood was on her, and I wasn't yet sure what it was.

"Hell," I said. There wasn't anything else a man could say when a woman acted up like that.

Her voice turned quieter, crisper. "Do you mind if I change my clothes?"

I went out into the hall. I started to slam the door and caught it on the swing and shut it softly. I went down the stairs and turned toward the lunchroom and stopped with my heart doing a complete flip.

The man with the crooked nose was sitting at the counter.

His compact body lounged indolently on the stool as he ate a slab of that impossible pie with gusto, and stirred his coffee. Tilly leaned against the gas range. Her eyes, as pale as Crooked Nose's own, were almost hidden in fleshy, narrowed sockets.

"What's the matter with that Plymouth you have outside?" she was saying.

I eased back out of Crooked Nose's sight if he should turn suddenly.

"Don't you want to sell cars?" I heard him say.

"That's what I'm in business to do. But I asked you, why do you want to buy another car?"

"I'm not sure that I want to. All I ask is if you have a good buy. I'm tired of that heap out there. I figure I could trade it in for a newer one."

"We don't take trade-ins."

"You don't? This is the first time I've heard of a place selling cars which didn't . . ."

Behind me Milton said: "Something bothering you?"

I hadn't heard him come in through the side door or down the stairs. He pressed the hot corn cob against his negligible chin and kept rheumy eyes on my face, waiting patiently for me to find an answer.

"I was going out to get something from my car," I said. "Any objection?"

"You don't get nothing out of your car, standing in the hall."

I stepped past him toward the side door. In the lunchroom I heard Crooked Nose say: "Can't you even make up a cheese sandwich for me?" Then I was outside. I turned right toward the used car lot.

There were at least a hundred cars lined up in half a dozen rows. The first few cars were ancient stuff, then they started to get better. There were a number in good-price condition made a year or two before the war, and there were quite a few only a few months off the production lines. Then the good cars petered out and there were scattered wrecks in various stages of being dismantled for parts.

The huge barn was a good three hundred feet beyond the end of the cars. It had been red once, but years of weathering had turned it scaly pink. I walked toward it. The door was on the right side. When I got closer, I heard voices.

A man said: "That's all we do when we finish this one, sit on our tails and wait. How the hell do I know how

long? Of all the lousy rotten luck!"

I had reached the broad rolling doors and was looking inside. It was a complete repair shop, from two power-driven hoists and arc welders to neat racks on the wall with any kind of wrench you could name and stacks of parts. There was room for a half dozen cars without crowding. Two were in there now and a slim kid in goggles was doing a paint spray job on one.

A second man sat on a keg, watching the kid spray. His long, unshaven chin moved rhythmically. A vague yellow fuzz kept his head from complete baldness. He spat tobacco into an inverted hub cap and said: "Let's hope it ain't too long, Beezie." Then he saw me.

He leaped off the keg as if shot out of it. The kid cut the spray gun and pushed his goggles up to his forehead.

"What the hell do you want?" Baldy demanded.

"I'm just looking around," I said, trying to sound calm about it.

"Yeah? Look somewhere else. Don't you see we're busy?"

"Are you?"

"A wise guy." Baldy glanced at the kid and shifted his tobacco to the other cheek. "Beat it."

The car which was being sprayed was a super deluxe Planet sedan, a little more expensive than my own, but the same model and year. The new coat was blue-gray. From where I stood I couldn't see anything of the original coat. I went in closer to get a look at the rear fender.

"Damn you!" Baldy roared. He snatched a Stilson wrench from a bench.

I didn't want to spoil it by making a fight of it. "Take it easy," I said quickly. "I'm bunking at Tilly's. I think I'm going to work with you guys."

"Yeah?" Baldy's long jaw jutted. "I ain't heard about it. Scram."

I scrambled. When I turned the corner of the barn, I saw Milton hurrying toward me. His oversized overalls flapped around his skinny body.

"They just kicked me out of the barn," I told him. He would hear it anyway, and it was best if he got it from me.

"Rufus sure would," he said joyously. "You're lucky you ain't got a slug in you."

We were walking back to the house. "Is Rufus the bald guy?" I asked.

"Rufus Lamb. Tough as you think you are. The young fella is Beezie.

Handy with tools. You keep away from there till George says you're okay."

"I was only looking around."

He cocked his head sideways and squinted. "You was only listening in the hall a while ago. You was going to get something from your car, but you didn't go near your car."

"I'll be blind if that's what you want," I said meekly. "In my room you started to tell me about a bag you said Ray Teacher had when he was killed."

He snickered. "Pumping me. Tilly says I talk too much. I told her not when I don't have to. Catch on?"

"I catch on," I said dismally.

I entered the house through the side door and went all the way up the hall and looked into the lunchroom. Crooked Nose was gone.

The place was empty.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MOLLY CRANE SAT AT one of the two bedroom windows. Her bag stood against the dresser where I had left it; she still wore the brown-and-white checked skirt and the copper-colored jersey sweater. A glass ashtray on the windowsill contained half a dozen cigarette butts. She must have been sitting at that window since I had left, and had watched me go across the car lot to the barn and return with Milton. A fresh cigarette dropped from the corner of her mouth.

She didn't turn her head when I entered. I walked across the bedroom to

her. "Crooked Nose was downstairs," I said.

The news did not create a sensation. "Did he see you?"

"No. He was having pie and coffee, and, talking to Tilly. I'm sure they're strangers to each other. Where can he fit in?"

"I can't imagine," she muttered to the window.

"He's not a cop. Lieutenant Woodfinch didn't know him, and he didn't come forward and corroborate my story that Larry had been taking me to Coney

Island. He wasn't working with Jasper Vital and Larry. He kept out of their sight and then tailed Larry in his own car when Larry could have used help to take me to Coney Island. He isn't in Moon's organization if he comes here as a stranger. What does that leave?"

"A lone wolf after the bag."

"But if he's here for the bag, he's about the only one who's pretty sure that I haven't got it. What makes him sure?"

Molly stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray and immediately lit another. She didn't seem to want to talk or do anything but sit there.

I leaned the backs of my thighs against the windowsill and looked down at her. "What's the matter, Molly?"

"I'm scared, Adam." She put a strained smile to her mouth. "It got me when I realized that Tilly would let us stay here. I guess I'm not as brave as I thought."

I nodded. "I know how you feel. But I've been scared for so long, since Monday evening, that a crust has formed over my fear. It's like the first couple of minutes shells come flying at you. After that you don't stop being afraid, but you stop giving a damn. Or you think you stop, and then suddenly you go to pieces."

"I won't go to pieces." She leaned forward and took my hand and held it against her cheek. "Now you know why I acted so rotten to you. It was sheer nerves. I think I've got over it."

My hand tingled against the soft warmth of her cheek and palm. Gently I pulled it away from her and used it

to reach for the pack of cigarettes on the windowsill. I told her what I had found in the car lot and in the barn.

"There's nothing exactly wrong," I said. "This place seems out-of-the-way for a used-car lot, but if it's the only one for a good many miles and offers bargains it might pay. The way those two men in the barn acted when I looked in doesn't mean much. Rufus Lamb could be one of those irritable men who doesn't like to be gawked at. The practically new Planet which was being repainted could have been in an accident. The fact is that there's almost nothing to go on."

"Except that the people who run the car-lot are crooks," Molly said. "Maybe they do need a mechanic, but you'll get the job only if you convince them that you're also a crook."

"The car-lot could be a cover for something else."

"Maybe." She didn't appear to be greatly interested. She was back in the dumps.

I went to the bathroom and washed up. Through the small bathroom window I could look down to the front of the building: A two-door '42 Plymouth was parked beside Molly's coupe. Crooked Nose had told Tilly he had a Plymouth.

I returned to the bedroom. Molly hadn't stirred.

I said: "I've got to have your gun. Crooked Nose knows me by sight. There's no telling what he'll do or tell the others if he catches sight of me."

The back of her head shook. "I need it more than you do. My fists aren't

good enough to protect me. Yours are."

Her alligator bag was on the dresser. I went to it and through the mirror I saw her looking at me. She didn't say anything. She waited with the cigarette dangling from her mouth and smoke flowing across her face.

"You want that gun in case you have to use it against me," I said tightly. "Like last night in your apartment. That's another thing that's scaring you, having to share a room with a man who might be a killer."

"I'm keeping the gun, Adam." She blew a thin line of smoke toward me. "Don't waste your time looking in the handbag. I'm not that stupid."

I said angrily: "I guess I've no right to ask anything of you. You're after your story and to hell with me. That's all right. But may I ask a small favor? May I borrow your car?"

"What for?"

"I want to see if I can learn anything in Badmont. Want to come?"

"No," she said tiredly. "The car keys are in my jacket."

The jacket was on the bed where she had tossed it. I took the keys from the pocket. When I got outside the house, the Plymouth was gone. I doubted that Crooked Nose had left for good.

There was a drugstore in Badmont which had a pretty good lunch counter and an apple-cheeked girl behind it. I had a real cup of coffee and a Western sandwich on soft roll.

A phone booth stared at me through the broad mirror behind the counter. In a house in Brooklyn, Esther was

waiting in numb terror for the phone to ring — to hear my voice tell her that I was safe or that I had been tortured into surrendering the bag and to get it from a certain place where I had hidden it and take it to another place. Or the voice might be that of the kidnaper demanding the bag as the price of my return, or of a policeman informing her that I had been found dead. She couldn't know which it would be. Perhaps the worst of all would be nothing at all happening, nothing but waiting.

And Carol was waiting with her. She was old enough to understand, to share the private hell with her mother.

I tore my eyes from the accusing reflection of the phone. There were New York City newspapers on a wall rack. I had to look at them. Molly had told me there was nothing in the morning papers, and there wasn't. The evening papers were yesterday's.

I ordered another cup of coffee and started a conversation. The girl had never heard of Tilly's place. I drank the coffee quickly, careful not to look at the phone in the mirror.

Next door there was a clothing store where I bought a white shirt and socks and handkerchiefs and underwear. The proprietor said that once, driving down from Middletown, he had stopped off at Tilly's for a bite. He had found it an excellent place to avoid in the future. He remembered that there was a used-car lot, but he had never heard anything about it.

I crossed the road to a filling station, A man who was fixing a flat tire said: "You mean that place over in York

State? Don't know much about 'em. They're nice folks though. Last spring I needed a transmission for a '37 Ford 60. Couldn't get it nowhere, but that bald man there — his name is Lamb — he pulled a transmission out of a Ford 60 he had on the lot and let me have it dirt cheap. If you're thinking of buying a used-car there, I reckon they're as honest as used-car dealers come."

I walked five hundred feet to another filling station. A man, tilted back in a chair against the show window, said: "Sure they sell their cars there. What d'you think they're in business for? But they're funny about trade-ins. What they want are straight cash transactions. Who doesn't, but how can you run a car business that way? If they take a trade-in for a good car, it's got to be a jalopy. Abel Wanderson had his eyes on a sweet '46 Buick that had only three thousand miles, but they wouldn't do business because he had a '42 Dodge in very good condition to trade. And they won't buy cars at all. I had a couple here I wanted to make a quick turnover on, but it was no soap with them. But they'll sell and their prices are fair enough."

"Do they run any other business at that place?"

"Well, there's a lunchroom and a tourist house. If you ask me, I don't see how they make a living. Not many people live in the area and even in the summer that's not a busy road. Well, I guess they know what they're doing."

I returned to the coupe which was parked in front of the drugstore. Across the street, at the first filling station I had stopped at, a convertible with the

top down stood between the two pump islands. The kid behind the wheel had his hair slicked down and his hands and face washed and wore a natty tweed loafer jacket — a cleaned up version of the kid named Beezie from Tilly's place. He wasn't buying gas. He was speaking to the man who had told me about the Ford transmission he had got from Rufus Lamb.

I was sure that I was the topic of their conversation. They kept glancing in my direction as they spoke. Once Beezie looked fully at me, and though he saw me looking at him, he made no gesture of greeting. He had tailed me to Badmont and was now checking up on what I'd been doing. That was a bad sign.

I made time back to Tilly's place.

Tilly and Rufus were in the lunchroom. They gave me deadpan nods when I entered and I nodded back the same way and went upstairs. Molly wasn't in our room. I went out to the hall and heard a car pull up. I continued on to the bathroom and looked out of the window. Beezie was getting out of his car. He moved like a man with urgent news that couldn't wait. He must have burned up the road to have arrived so close behind me.

My throat was parched. I took a drink of water from the bathroom tap and returned to the hall. I could hear them talking in the lunchroom, but they kept their voices too low for me to catch words. I started down the stairs, changed my mind, walked noiselessly back to the door, closed the door. I reached for the key, but there was none.

Molly's handbag was on the dresser. I opened it. There were the usual cosmetics, keys, handkerchief, and a fountain pen and the wallet was well-filled. But no gun.

I laid her airplane bag on the bed and rummaged through it. I found blue silk sleeping pajamas with little white polka dots and a robe to match, underwear and slippers, but no gun. I felt the pillows. I searched the dresser and the closet. Then there was nowhere else to look.

Where was Molly?

I shook a cigarette out of a pack on the dresser and without lighting it went out to the hall. The voices were still in the lunchroom. From the downstairs hall I would be able to listen unseen to whatever they were saying, and if it became necessary I could slip out through the side door.

I was halfway down the stairs when Rufus Lamb and Beezie appeared at the foot of the stairs. Rufus had a gun in his hand. "Come on down, mug," he said.

Molly hadn't told me how I could use my fists when a man was pointing a gun at me. When I reached the foot of the stairs, I saw that Tilly and Milton were also in the hall. All the faces were grim, remorseless.

"What's this?" I demanded.

Nobody would answer me. Rufus had stepped behind me; I felt his gun against my spine. Beezie ran his hands over my body. I stood with the unlit cigarette between cold lips and a matchbook in one hand.

"He's clean," Beezie announced.

I was taken into a downstairs room I had never been in before.

It was larger than the lunchroom and everything in it was new. A red broadloom rug gave the place warmth. A brown leather couch and two brown leather chairs were grouped about a fireplace. Newspapers and magazines were scattered like in any private home. A very large round table had plenty of tubular chairs around it. An oak cabinet radio looked as if it had just come from the factory. It was a cozy room, a sitting and lounging and probably eating room.

I walked away from Rufus Lamb's gun as far as the table and turned. "What the hell's going on?"

Tilly polished her elaborate ring against her vast bosom. "So you came here for a job, but you didn't bring a thing to change into," she sneered. "You had to go to Badmont to buy clean shirts and underwear."

Was that all? My stomach muscles loosened. "We brought a bag. Those were just some extras I needed."

"I looked in the bag," Tilly said. "A few woman's things, very few, but nothing a man can wear."

"I forgot my bag. I remembered when I was in the car, but didn't bother to go back. Anyway, what's the difference?"

"The hell with that!" Rufus Lamb said. The gun was held lightly along his thigh. He stuck out his long jaw. "What were you asking questions about us for in Badmont? Beezie shadowed you. Them questions sound like spy work to me."

I put disgust into my voice. "I've a

right to know what I'm getting into."

"But you don't answer questions." Tilly said.

Rufus brought up his gun a little. "You'll answer 'em now. Start talking about yourself. How you knew Ray Teacher and what your record is and where you've been and so on."

I pressed my dry tongue against the tip of the unlit cigarette in my mouth. This was the showdown. I had tried and failed. The only consolation was that Molly wasn't here.

"So you can't talk?" Rufus' voice was deadly quiet.

"I told Tilly I'd talk to George Moon," I said.

"You're already talking to us. Right now."

I lit my cigarette. I ran the risk that my hands wouldn't be steady, but they were.

"I'll talk to George Moon," I repeated stolidly.

In the hall a dragging voice said: "Did I hear my name mentioned?"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HE WAS SO TALL that he had to duck to get through the doorway. Not big. Just very long, built something like myself, but without my shoulders, and topping my own height by five or six inches. suddenly everybody in the room was a midget.

Lazily he came into the room. He wore no hat and a curly brown forelock dangled boyishly over his high, narrow forehead. His mild brown eyes looked at me over the heads of the others, then down at the gun Rufus Lamb held along his thigh, then down at Tilly's neat hairdo.

"What's up?" he asked in that slow voice which had been so terrifying when I had heard it over the phone. It was terrifying now too.

Tilly said eagerly: "Did you get it?"

"Not yet, Breen is —" George Moon checked himself. His eyes, cautious now,

were back on me. "Who're you?"

I blew out smoke. "I'm a good mechanic. Before he was killed, Ray Teacher told me I could find a job here."

"He's a cop," Rufus Lamb growled. "He's been acting like one."

"Let Tilly tell me," George Moon said.

While Tilly told him, I drew cigarette smoke into my lungs and tried to look merely patient. But my thoughts were frantic. I could no longer avoid making direct answers to questions, and I hadn't the knowledge to make up satisfactory lies.

"Where's his wife?" George Moon asked when Tilly had finished.

Tilly thought that she was still upstairs. Milton was sent to bring her down. I started to wonder again where she could have gone, and then I had

more immediate worries.

"Well?" Moon said to me.

My stomach bounced, but my voice was reasonably calm. "If Ray Teacher were alive, he'd vouch for me."

"Convenient having a dead man recommend you. Where did you know him?"

"Out west."

"The West is a big place."

"Frisco, I think. I'm not sure. I've been all over."

"How long ago did you know him?"

"Years ago." I was like a man dancing barefoot on a hot stove, trying to keep both feet in the air at the same time. "For the last four years I was out of circulation. I was in the army."

"And before that?"

I said sullenly: "There are things in my record I'd rather not talk about."

"Tell us the things you're not afraid to talk about," Moon persisted relentlessly.

He had me hemmed in. Each evasive answer led to another direct question. I tried again. "What's all the fuss about? If you've got a job for me, okay. If not, tell me and I'll beat it."

"You won't beat it," Rufus Lamb said softly. "You know too much already. What are you throwing a bluff for if you're clean? I can smell cop a mile." He glanced up at Moon. "It'll be dark soon, boss. We can take him back off the reservoir."

George Moon scratched his nose. There was silence. The boss was deciding my fate.

Then there were feet coming down the stairs. Two pairs. Milton had found

Molly and was returning with her. They would do to her whatever they did to me.

Heads turned, all except Rufus Lamb's. He kept his eyes and his gun on me. Milton entered first, shuffling into the room with his chinless face sagging like an idiot's. Molly was right behind him. She stepped around him, sidled past Beezie, and turned at the end of the couch. Her pearl-handled automatic was in her hand.

"It's my play," she said crisply.

She had put herself as far as possible from the others and to the left of Rufus Lamb. Her mouth was tight and her gray eyes were big with tension, but the steadiness with which she held her gun was impressive. At that moment nobody counted but the two who had guns, Molly and Rufus.

"Drop your gun," she ordered him.

He was looking at her over his left shoulder. His body was between his gun and her; he was calculating his chance if he swung and shot. He must have been very fast with a gun, because I could see that he had decided to take the chance. His right shoulder drew up. His muscles coiled for the pivot. So I hit him.

His eyes were off me, and my fist was on his jaw before he knew that I had covered the distance between us. He crashed against Tilly and jammed her against the radio cabinet. He bounced off her fatness and staggered. I hit him again. He sat down.

"Hold it!" Molly barked.

George Moon had started to shift his loose-jointed body toward her. She

waved her gun at him and then brought it back to Rufus in a single fluid motion. Rufus was helpless for at least a ten-count; his head sagged and his gun hand was useless. I stooped and plucked the gun from him. When I rose, I saw that Moon had made no further move. Molly and I had all the visible weapons in the room.

There were two sounds, Beezie swearing and Tilly panting raggedly as she rubbed her plump hip where it had been slammed against the radio cabinet. Milton continued to catch flies with his mouth. Rufus held his long stubbed jaw in both hands and shook fog out of his head. George Moon completely relaxed, studied Molly's figure.

"Let's get out of here," I said hoarsely.

Molly said, "Don't be absurd, honey," and rested the backs of her calves against the arm of the couch. A few hours ago in our room she had been morose and irritable because she had been scared. Now that an actual situation had developed only a twitch at a corner of her eye indicated that she wasn't wholly at ease. She never stopped bewildering me.

Then George Moon laughed. His laughter was as languid as his speaking voice. I backed to the window, my finger tight on Rufus' gun. What was there for Moon to laugh about? The guns were in our possession.

"You're not cops," Moon drawled. "Cops would have a pat story ready and pour it out as soon as they got a chance. Besides, you're too damn pretty to be a cop, sweetheart. Just a couple of babes in the woods trying to act tough."

Molly gave him her deluxe smile.

"You'd be surprised at how tough Lou Darby's daughter can get."

That was sensational news to everybody but me and possibly Beezie. Tilly stopped rubbing her hip, Rufus took his hands from his jaw, Milton's mouth hung wider.

"So Lou Darby had a daughter?" Moon said, never taking his eyes from Molly. "Or did he?"

"Only his close friends knew that he had a wife and child in Denver," Molly said.

"Yeah, Denver." Rufus Lamb pulled himself up to his feet, and there was a look of wonder on his face. "A little white house — what was the name of that street?"

Always there were traps in the form of questions. I pushed my gun out.

"Atterkill Drive," Molly said glibly and pulled her sweater down with her left hand.

"Yeah, Atterkill Drive." Rufus turned his head to Moon. "I visited Lou Darby in '35. Stayed three-four days in his place. Tried to talk him into coming east on a hundred grand heist. He thought it over and turned me down. There'll never be another guy who could case a bank like Lou Darby. He'd spend weeks just looking over the layout. He'd make blueprints and time schedules and the job would go off like clockwork. Did you know him, boss?"

"No, but everybody's heard of Lou Darby." Moon leaned against the air and measured Molly's body. I could see his eyes taking in the fact that here was enough woman for a man like him, and

beautiful enough for a man of any size.

Rufus went on: "Then after a job Lou'd go back to his little house in Denver and his wife and kid, and nobody in town ever knew he was Lou Darby. His neighbors thought he was a retired businessman. I remember his wife, lots younger than him and a looker. And there was a yella-haired girl around thirteen." He turned back to Molly. "What's your name?"

"Clara Darby," she said. "My mother was Ann. I called my father Pops."

Rufus nodded his head vigorously. "Yeah, yeah. You was tall even then. Built like a matchstick. I never saw Lou again. He got it a year later."

"Two years later," Molly said. "One of his boys sold him out to the cops. A rat named Shorty Wheel. The cops were hidden in the bank and they cut Pops down without giving him a chance."

Rufus clucked his tongue. "That's the way I heard it. I used to know Shorty Wheel. A no-good rat." He beamed at her. "I'll be damned, Lou Darby's girl!"

She had everything a salesman needed — facts and glibness and confidence and sex appeal. She had sold Rufus Lamb, and through him the others, all except Tilly. I didn't like the unyielding set of Tilly's doughy face and the narrowness of her eyes.

"And I came near pluggin' Lou's girl!" Rufus was saying. "That's a sweet sock you got, fella."

It was a time for goodwill and gallantry. "I'm sorry I had to clip you," I said.

"Good thing you did. I'm mighty fast

on the pivot. I would've put a slug in her." Rufus frowned suddenly. He remembered that there was a great deal as yet unexplained. "Who're you?" he demanded.

"A guy who can take care of himself." I left it in the air for Molly to pick up. She did. "He's Bert Hemsley."

I would need a little black book to keep track of all my names. This one fell flat. It seemed to mean no more to any of them than it did to me.

"An old-timer like you must have heard of Bert Hemsley," she said to Rufus. "He was one of Pop's boys. He was in on that last bank job when Pops was killed. Bert got winged in the leg and a few days later he was picked up by the state cops. He got out of the big house after a six-year stretch. A few weeks later we were married."

"Hemsley?" Rufus pondered. "Well, I didn't know many of Lou's boys. I never worked with him myself."

"Ray Teacher did for a while," Molly said. "That's how Bert happened to know him."

The first week I had sold cars I had learned that whenever sales resistance reared its ugly head you chopped it down by pointing out another virtue in your product. Molly had the technique down pat.

"That's right," Rufus said eagerly. "Ray used to work with Lou." He tossed me a grin. "Any of Lou's boys are aces with me."

Tilly said: "You men are idiots."

She waddled to the center of the room and glared up at Moon who towered ridiculously over her short, wide, body.

"Idiots!" she said. "I see the way you're looking at her, George. You've fallen so hard your mind has stopped working."

The corner of Moon's mouth lifted. "Has Rufus fallen for her?"

"Rufus has fallen for the idea that she's Lou Darby's daughter."

Rufus took it as a personal affront. "Well, she is. Hardly nobody knew where Lou lived and that he had a wife and kid. This here girl was only a kid when Lou was killed, but she knows the street and the names and that she called him Pops and everything. How'd she know if she wasn't his daughter? Besides, I seen her, didn't I? She's grown up now, but she had light hair and was built tall and pretty even then."

Tilly refused to backtrack. "So her father was Darby or the man in the moon. It doesn't explain the way they acted since they came here. Why didn't this man, Thomas Rover or Bert Hemmley or whatever his name is—why didn't he come right out and say who he was? Why was he acting like a spy? Why did they try to get a room here without saying anything about themselves?"

They were good questions. I could see that they bothered Moon and Rufus. They bothered me a lot more, especially when I saw Molly's teeth worrying her lower lip. The gun had a comforting feel against my palm.

Molly turned her head to me. "Should we tell them, honey?"

Why ask me? I was merely a spectator like Milton and Beezie. "Why not?" I said, handing it back to her.

She waved her gun at Moon. "Listen,"

she said tensely. "A dirty doublecrossing stool pigeon got my father. I don't want the same thing to happen to me."

"So?" Moon looked around as if to make sure everybody was still in the room. "Nobody rats here."

"We heard talk in New York about Jasper Vital and Larry Goodby."

"That was different," Moon said. "They tried to take over. What is it, sweetheart? A reward?"

"Five grand," Molly told him. "Did you hear of the payroll stickup in Nashville last week?"

That did it. Beezie whistled. Milton's mouth closed and opened again. Moon looked at Molly without concentrating on her shape. Even Tilly seemed a trifle awed.

"Twenty-three grand, wasn't it?" Rufus said admiringly. "Sure, a man and a woman. Masked. Got clean away. I read it in the paper."

Tilly sought to regain her stolen thunder. "They're hot. We can't have them here."

"There's no heat on us," Molly said. "We worked it neatly, as neatly as Pops would have. Nobody saw us but two people, and our heads and faces were covered. The dough is stashed; we don't intend to touch it for at least a year. Pops always took his time about circulating money, even when it wasn't hot. We came on to New York and saw Ray Teacher, who was an old friend of Bert's. We didn't tell Ray much except that Bert was looking for a job. Ray said there might be something for us in Tilly's place. It sounded like a good place to hole up in for a while.

Then Ray got killed. We came here anyway, but we didn't dare talk to anybody we weren't sure of. There's five grand reward posted on the Nashville job. Pops was sold out for less."

"Why the spying?" Tilly said rather weakly.

It was time I asserted myself as part of the family. I'd had some little experience as a salesman myself. "Clara told you. We could trust George Moon—he's too much of a big shot to go after a reward—but why should we trust a lot of people we didn't know? Moon wasn't here. I couldn't feel comfortable unless I knew what the setup here was, so I went to Badmont to ask some harmless questions. Wouldn't any of you have done the same thing in our spot?"

"Why," Tilly demanded, jabbing a fat finger at Molly, "did you pull a rod on us?"

"Did I pull a gun? I seem to remember that Rufus did first." She dipped her little automatic and spread her smile around the room. "How did I know what was going on down here? Pops taught me to be careful—always."

The sale was completed. Molly had given us identity, established us as one of them. Tilly clicked her ring against her teeth and waddled to a chair.

"Is that on the level, that you know cars?" Moon asked me.

"All there is to know."

Moon nodded and sauntered over to

Molly. "You and Bert are safe here, sweetheart," he told her. "I can use a good mechanic." And his eyes said that he could use her too, and her responding smile was not reluctant. I wondered what a husband was supposed to do about it.

"Need that rod any more?" Rufus said genially.

The gun was still leveled at his chest. "I don't know," I said. "Do I?"

Instantly the room was still. They all stared at me.

Molly said sharply: "Honey, George Moon's word is good."

A sane man would have used that gun to get out of the house and keep going. But Molly was calling the turns. She had handled it fine so far, but I hoped to God she knew what she was doing from here on. And that what she wanted was what I wanted.

I reversed Rufus' gun and returned it to him butt first. "Thanks for the loan," I said.

He grinned and stuck the gun into his hip pocket. I pulled out cigarettes and passed the pack around. We were one big happy family of crooks. None of them could guess how alone I felt.

"How about some supper, Tilly?" Moon said. "I'm starved."

So was I, considering that I hadn't had a solid bite all day, but I didn't look forward to Tilly's cooking, not after sampling her coffee.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

WE ATE AT THE BIG round table in the privacy of the sitting room. Milton waited on us, lugging in the food from the lunchroom where Tilly dished it out. We had canned tomato juice, and canned vegetable soup, and pot roast which fell apart on the fork, and boiled potatoes which were only slightly underdone. I had eaten worse meals in the army, but not often.

Molly sat between George Moon and me. For all the attention she paid me, I might actually have been her husband. It wasn't entirely her fault; Moon's voice and eyes monopolized her. That gave me reason to sulk and stay out of the table talk, which was on dangerous ground — for me. They were discussing the exploits of Lou Darby. Molly handled her end more than adequately. She could have written a book about him and all the minor crooks who had moved in his orbit.

When the meat course had been served, Tilly came in from the lunchroom to join us at the table. She poured juice and soup down her throat and then glared across her pot roast at Moon. "Are you trying to drive us crazy, George? Did you get it or did you come here without it?"

Moon crossed his knife and fork on his plate and sat back. "Breen is gone."

"You mean he took a powder with the bag?" Rufus said.

"The cops are sure Larry Goodby snatched him. You know Larry. He'll work on Breen till he finds out where Breen planted the bag."

"That Larry," Milton snickered. Like Tilly, he was now sitting at the table. "I'd hate to be in Breen's shoes."

Moon's features twisted to one side. He leaned forward, swept his eyes slowly past Molly and let them rest for a moment on me. He nodded to himself, having decided that there was nothing about this he did not want us, the newcomers, to hear. "A dick who was trailing Breen saw Larry slug him. Then while the dumb dick was chasing Larry or calling an ambulance or something, Breen drove off with a dame. A couple of witnesses said Breen was practically out on his feet. They say he didn't seem to know what was happening when the dame shoved him into her car."

Molly's profile was static. She speared a piece of potato with her fork, brought it mechanically up to her mouth, chewed it as if it were gum.

"What dame?" Tilly said.

"Nobody got a good look at her. The cops figure she was working with Larry. That sounds reasonable."

Tilly snorted. "You're losing your grip, George. That sounds like a gag to me. Breen wanted to shake you off. He's hiding somewhere with the bag right now, laughing up his sleeve at you."

Here I was, the man they were talking about, and they didn't know it. I could have laughed up my sleeve if I had had any laughter in me.

"I'm sure Larry's got him," Moon said bleakly, one word at a time trick-

ling from his lips. "It's a fact that Larry slugged him and a dame was waiting to drive him away. And why would Breen blow with the bag? He couldn't use it. I looked into Breen's record and he's what he says he is, just an auto salesman with a wife and kid. He figured he'd be smart and hold me up for a stiff price." He spoke a trifle faster, defending himself. "I was handling it right. I showed his daughter a good time for a couple of hours and then told him next time she wouldn't come back. That scared him, but not enough. He went to the cops. Next time I took his girl, he would've stayed away from the cops. He would've broken his neck to hand me the bag and get his daughter back."

"Only Larry was a step ahead of you," Rufus growled. "What do we do now?"

"If Larry gets the bag, he'll have to come out in the open sooner or later. And then —" Moon snapped his fist shut over air. Slowly he let the fist sink, opened it, closed the long fingers over a water glass.

I said: "What's in this bag you're talking about?"

Eyes shifted to me. Only Tilly's were definitely hostile. Her ring finger jabbed toward me. "George, he was pumping Milton about the bag."

"Just asking him," I said, "the way I'm asking now. I keep hearing mysterious talk about a bag. Naturally I want to know what it's about."

Tilly's finger did not waver. "I bet he's one of Jasper Vital's Florida boys.

So what if his wife is Clara Darby? They came here for the bag."

Molly was silent. This one she was leaving to me, an easy one.

"I thought you said somebody named Breen had the bag and that Larry had Breen," I said. "If we were working with Larry, we'd be with him, helping him get the bag from Breen. And if Clara and I had come here for any reason but the one we told you, wouldn't we have had a neat story all ready for you? And if we knew anything about the bag, wouldn't we know what was in it without asking?"

Rufus Lamb said: "What's the matter with you, Tilly? I know all the Florida boys. They drove up here all winter."

The finger withdrew. Tilly clicked her ring against her teeth, a grudging admission of defeat.

"What about the bag?" I persisted.

Moon finished chewing the food in his mouth. Then he drawled: "What makes you so anxious, Bert?"

"If I'm going to work for you, I want to be all the way in."

"You'll be when the time comes." He leaned forward, looked lazily at me past Molly. "Don't be curious about anything but what you're told."

I didn't say anything. The others watched me, stacking me up against their boss. He couldn't trust me completely because he intended to take something from me, or at least borrow it. I glanced sideways. Moon had abandoned me. His shoulder was against Molly's and he was whispering into her hair. She gave him a glowing open-mouthed

smile. She wasn't making it easy for me to play the role of her husband.

Molly left the table as soon as she finished her meat dish. I remained for the coffee, but gave it up after a few sips. I went upstairs and pushed open the door to our room. Molly stood in front of the dresser in brassiere and shorts. I said, "Sorry," and beat a quick retreat out to the hall. Somebody was coming up the stairs. I waited until Bezie's head appeared and then reentered the room. She was getting into her blue silk robe with the white polka dots.

"I can't be seen or heard knocking at the door," I said. "We're supposed to be married. Remember?"

"You're the one who jumped out. I didn't mind." She was facing the dresser mirror and brushing her honey-colored hair. "Well, we did it," she said cheerfully.

"You did it. Thanks for saving my life."

"That was only incidental. I saved mine too, you know."

"Where were you when Milton came up for you? You weren't here or in the bathroom."

"Searching rooms," she replied blithely. "There was a possibility I might come across something. Luckily I popped out of Tilly's room just before Milton saw me. It would have been hard explaining that. Then I had to use my gun downstairs until I was sure my story convinced them."

"Did you find anything in the rooms?"

"No. I hardly expected to."

I sat on the bed and watched her apply flame-red lipstick. After a little while I said: "Are you Clara Darby?"

She laughed noiselessly into the mirror. "Was I that good, honey?"

"Yes."

She leaned back against the dresser and regarded me with amusement. "I'm Molly Crane, daughter of the eminently respectable Dr. Freeman Crane of Baltimore."

"How do you know so much about Lou Darby?"

"The advantage of a writing career. Last year I did a magazine article on Lou Darby, one of America's most notorious bank robbers."

"Suppose Rufus Lamb knew the real Clara Darby?"

"When Darby was killed, Clara and her mother moved to a small Ohio town. They're still there. Clara is married to a bus driver; he doesn't suspect who his wife's father was. Nobody does. I found them, but when I learned the situation, how they'd cut themselves off from the past, I naturally gave my word to keep their secret."

"Who's Bert Hemsley?"

"You are. I never heard of another." Her teeth showed very white between the flame lips. "Me, Clara Darby! Did you really believe that?"

"I don't know what to believe about you. One hour you're scared sick and the next you're facing a bunch of professional gunmen as competent and cool as the devil."

"I'm a girl of moods," she said lightly.

She picked up an eyebrow pencil and did a job on herself.

This was like a scene at home, with me sitting on the bed and watching Esther make up. It was twenty-four hours since I'd vanished. What was Esther doing now? Still waiting for the telephone to ring or for a knock on the door?

"There's nothing to keep us here any longer," I said. "We know the bag isn't here."

"Where will you go?"

"Home where I belong."

"You heard what Moon said. He had planned to kidnap your daughter again."

I stood up. "Listen. Those are stolen cars down there."

Her back remained to me. She was tying a fresh ribbon around her bob. This one was black. "Wasn't it obvious?" she said.

"It is now. The jalopies down there are just to cover the good cars. They don't want to accept good cars in trade; they can get them for nothing by stealing them. They run them up from Florida and maybe elsewhere. That, I think, was Vital's and Larry's end of the job down there. When they learned that I not only had the bag but also worked in automobiles, they decided at once that I was in the racket. This car lot is only a depot. They probably dispose of the cars in Brooklyn. I'll get the police to raid this place and Moon will be in jail where he can't touch me."

"How will the police be able to prove they're hot cars? They've repainted

them and changed the license plates."

"There are serial and motor numbers stamped on each car, and the cars are registered in the names of the rightful owners."

She moved over to me with her free-swinging stride. She put her palms flat on my chest. "Honey, I know how crooks work. Do you think George Moon would be so careless as to leave evidence around in the open? And if he did, what would a raid accomplish? Moon and Tilly and a few others would be arrested. He has a bigger organization than what you see here. There would be others outside of jail who would still want the bag as badly as ever and who are certain you have it."

I stood rigid. Her hair was in my nostrils and I smelled perfume in it. "What are you after for yourself, Molly?"

"I'm after a bigger story than a hot car racket. A murder story." She threw her head back and looked gravely into my face. "And I want to help you out of this mess. I'm not as hard-boiled as I pretend. Do you want to know the real reason I was nasty to you this afternoon? Because you're a married man and a father, and I—I—"

We kissed.

There was no preparation, no plan. All at once our mouths were together. I held her close. Her arms wound around to my back.

Abruptly she pulled away from me. Gathering her robe tightly about her waist, she walked to the dresser and shook a cigarette out of the pack.

Watching her, I felt like a school boy who had been slapped by a girl.

"I'd like to get dressed," she said quietly.

I looked at the slight sag of her wide shoulders and the fine sweep of her hips. Then I said, "I'm sorry," and went out.

Rufus Lamb and Beezie were talking baseball in the lunchroom. I joined them at the wirelegged table. Beezie was a Brooklyn fan and Rufus liked the Chicago Cubs. I decided that a Westerner like Bert Hemsley ought to root for the St. Louis Cards, and I did.

After a while I heard people come down the stairs. I heard Molly laugh gaily. Rufus cut a sentence in two and put his eyes flatly on me. From where I sat, I had a glimpse of Molly and George Moon round the staircase and head toward the side door. She was clinging to his arm.

I stood up and looked out of the lunchroom window. It was night, but light from the lunchroom flowed out to the parking area in front of the building. Moon led her to a gleaming Imperial Chrysler parked beside her coupe. She wore a red wool dress with a square low neckline. Her tweed jacket was over the arm which wasn't clinging to Moon. His height cut down her own and made her look very feminine. The smile she gave him as he opened the door for her illuminated the night.

I found that my fingers were on my lips. I could still taste her kiss.

The car drove off. I turned away from the window and saw Rufus standing at my side. His hand dropped from the gun in his hip pocket. Tilly was there too. I hadn't heard her enter. She leaned between the two stools against the counter and looked frightened.

"Get her out of here," Tilly said harshly. "Take her away before there's trouble."

"Trouble?" I muttered stupidly.

"You idiot!" she said. "And George is another. He can't keep his hands off a pretty girl. You want him to kill you?"

"I can handle him," I muttered.

Rufus tapped my shoulder. "You'll have to handle all of us," he said softly. "George is the boss. Be a smart cookie and scram with your wife."

Damn Molly! Damn her for having put me in this preposterous position! Damn her for having kissed me!

"There won't be any trouble," I said thickly. "I don't mind. I don't mind at all."

I slunk out of that room, away from the contempt in their eyes.

I sat in darkness at the window at which she had sat that afternoon. A three-quarter moon rose above a hill behind the barn, and by its light the cars were crouching monsters lined up for parade. The night was still and the house was still.

That afternoon she had left the glass ashtray choked with cigarette butts tipped red by her painted mouth. Now at midnight my own butts had erected

a mound which had periodic landslides onto the white windowsill. The next butt I flicked through the partly open window. It arched like a miniature rocket and glowed faintly in the short withered grass.

"Hey!" Milton appeared out of nowhere and killed the butt with his toe. Then he peered up at my window. Moonlight poured over his wizened figure in the oversized overalls.

"That you, Bert?" he called.

"Yes."

"Trying to start a fire and burn up the cars?"

"I'll be more careful."

I lit another cigarette. Milton was gone. Then night belonged to the cars and me.

When the cigarette was smoked down, I sought for room in the ashtray. That caused a major landslide. I started to pile the butts back and paused with a red-tipped one between my thumb and forefinger. Her lips had tinted it, and those lips had been pressed against mine. That had been four hours ago, but the taste of her mouth had not left. I thought that the taste would remain with me for the rest of my life.

To hell with you, Molly Crane, if that's your name!

A dot of light appeared and vanished at the far end of a row of cars. A match, I thought, struck by Milton for his corncob pipe. The glow returned, steadier than a match and shooting out in a thin stream. It crawled over the heavy chrome of a late-model radiator grill and expired.

I opened the window all the way, leaned over the sill. Moonlight solidified a patch of darkness into a human shape. Milton? I could not tell. But Milton would not be cautiously keeping the cars between himself and the house. I could see the shape only because I was looking down from above.

The light came on a third time. He had the front right door of a sedan open. His torso leaned inside. When he straightened up, the light swirled across his face, and the instant before it went out I glimpsed a twisted nose and a pointed chin. I was not surprised.

I put on the room light and searched airplane bag, mattress, dresser, closet. No gun, of course. I should have known better than to waste the time. Molly had taken her handbag with her, and that was where her gun would be. To protect herself against Moon if necessary, or to keep it out of my hands. Both probably.

I went out through the side door and leaned around the corner of the house. No sign of Milton. I crossed to the row of cars where I had seen Crooked Nose. Keeping to the shadows of the cars, I walked noiselessly over soft ground. My hands were lonely for a weapon. I picked up a rock as big as my fist; after a few steps I discarded it. My fist would be as good as a rock, but not as good as a gun if he had one. I walked on, listening to the pounding of my heart and to whatever else was to be heard.

I reached the end of the row. Three hundred feet ahead something glided

around a corner of the barn. A human shape? An animal? A swaying branch cutting off moonlight? I didn't know. Bending my head, as if that would hide me from watching eyes, I did a hundred yard dash to the barn.

The barn doors were locked. There were no windows or cracks through which to peer. I made a circuit of the barn, and I stepped into the sharp beam of a flashlight.

"Looking for something, Bert?"

Milton's voice said.

I waited for him to come to me. A rifle rested in the crook of one arm, a flashlight was held in the other gnarled hand, the pipe was clamped in his lipless mouth.

"I saw a prowler from my window," I said.

"A what?"

"Somebody with a flashlight."

"That was me."

"No. It was a small light, like a fountain pen flashlight. And I had a look at his face. A crooked nose and a very deep cleft in his chin."

That didn't seem to mean anything to Milton. He spoke out of the side of his mouth to keep the pipe in place. "I been watching. I ain't seen nobody."

The rifle muzzle hovered negligently in my direction. I said: "Don't you believe me?"

"Sure, Bert. We keep watch all night so nobody'll steal things out of the car. Me and Beezie take turns."

"Doesn't anybody here but you work? You're waiter, watchman, bellhop, and I bet lots of other things."

"Yeah, they sure run the tail off me," he agreed. "Let's go back, Bert."

When he reached the front of the rows of cars, Milton drifted off to the left and I walked on alone. Headlights swung off the road. I watched Molly and Moon get out of the car. His arm slid about her waist as they strolled to the side door. They didn't see me. I waited a minute and then followed.

Their voices drifted down from the upstairs hall. Gay, low, intimate voices. I stood with one foot on the lowest step. Suddenly the voices ceased. Was he kissing her? Then they were talking again, too low for words to reach me. I didn't particularly care what they said. It was just that I didn't have the stomach to face them together.

Tilly came out of the sitting room. She said suspiciously, "What are you—" and broke off. She had heard the voices upstairs. She came close to me. "Why don't you get out of here?" she whispered. "Take her away. George goes haywire when he sees a woman he wants."

Feet moved in the upstairs hall. A door opened and closed.

"It's all right," I muttered. "There won't be any trouble." I went up the stairs.

Molly was hanging her tweed jacket into the closet. She glanced over her shoulder when she heard me enter. "I just got back," she said. There was none of the laughter in her voice I had heard from the foot of the stairs. She sounded tired.

I went as far as the bed and looked

at her. I wondered how she would look in an evening gown, one of those brief, strapless, clinging sexy affairs. She would look wonderful in anything that went with a stately figure and a long bob.

"It's a surprise finding you here," I said. "I expected you to be in Moon's room."

Her hand, closing the closet door, froze; her square shoulders went rigid. Then she closed the door all the way and turned to me. "Don't tell me you're jealous?" No smile, placating or disdainful, went with that. Her expression was as weary as her voice.

"It's none of my business what you do," I said stiffly.

She came toward me. She stood so close that I could again smell her hair. "Honey, maybe you should leave. Take my car. I'll give them a reason why you've gone."

"And you?"

"I'll stay." She paused. My hands wanted to touch her, and I hated them because they did. Then she said: "It shouldn't matter what you think of me, but it does. You ought to know why I went out with Moon tonight. We're spies here, and the business of spies is to learn things."

"Sex appeal helps," I said dryly.

"Yes." Her gaze did not waver. "We went to a juke joint. We danced and drank beer. We talked. That's why I'd gone with him, of course — to talk."

"Did it do any good?"

"No."

Her mouth was only a little below

mine, the flame-red mouth I could still taste on my lips. I reached for her mouth with mine. I had sworn to myself that I wouldn't again, but there it was.

At the last instant she jerked her head aside, and my mouth caught the side of her chin. Like any fumbling youngster trying to snatch a kiss in a doorway.

I sidled away from her. "I suppose kissing one man an hour is enough for you," I said.

I felt her come after me, felt her hand on my arm. "You have a wife and a daughter," she said huskily. "I'm not much on morals, but I'm not like that. You're too swell a guy to hurt."

"Thanks." I wasn't particularly bitter. I was just overwhelmingly tired of it all and wanted to go home where I belonged. I moved away from her again, this time as far as the window, and looked out over the car lot. Nobody was down there. Not even a shadow.

"Adam, this evening you wanted to go home," she said. "You can't yet, it's too dangerous, but get out of this place. I haven't the story I want, but I'll go with you if that will make you go."

I said: "A little while ago I saw Crooked Nose in the car lot."

"What was he doing?"

"Spying, like us. There's something here and he knows it. Probably the bag."

"You know that Moon hasn't got it."

"But somebody else here might. If Vital and Larry doublecrossed Moon, why not some of the others? Crooked Nose knows it. That's why he's here."

"So you're staying?"

"I can't go home and there's no sense going anywhere else. I've got to finish it here." I turned from the window. "Crooked Nose might still be down there. Let me have your gun."

"And do what with it?"

"If I find Crooked Nose, I might have to protect myself. Or use it to make him tell me what he's after."

She fumbled at the cord of her robe. "I need it more than you do."

"I'll return it."

"Please don't keep asking me."

I laughed between my teeth. "Moon

is sure Breen has the bag. He ought to know, so I have it. I came here to find out how important what's in the bag is to them so I can know how high a price I can get for it. That's the way your mind works, doesn't it?"

She didn't answer. I strode past her to the door.

"Adam," she said.

I stopped. "Yes?"

"George Moon wanted to kiss me, but I didn't let him."

"Didn't you?" I said without interest. I continued out of the room.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE MOON SLANTED DOWN over the car lot like a reading lamp. It revealed Milton seated against the back of the house on a wooden box. His pipe was in his mouth and his rifle across his knees. I eased back to the road, walked as far as the state line, stepped into brush. I had taken the flashlight from Molly's coupe, but I didn't snap it on. That was for extreme emergencies.

Brush provided cover as far as the lower left corner of the car lot. Cars were between Milton and me. If I couldn't see him, he couldn't see me.

Only one window on that side of the house showed light. The two windows of our room were dark. I wondered if Molly had undressed and got into bed so quickly, or had left the room, or was standing there in darkness watch-

ing the lot. I moved on.

It had occurred to me that Crooked Nose had seen me come that first time and had ducked into one of the cars. That was what I would have done. He might still be there, waiting until all the windows darkened. I walked up one row and before I came in sight of Milton cut between two cars to the next row. I was looking for the smallest of lights, listening for any sound which could be made by a man. All I heard was a man cough in the house.

Twice I was fooled by something in the back seats of cars — once by a white rag which might have been a man crouching on the floorboard, once by a peculiarly shifting shadow caused by moonlight. But when I did find him there was no doubt that it was a man.

Blandly he was sitting upright on the back seat of a sedan. He was watching the house through the left window, and I had approached from his right. He didn't know I was there until I had torn the door open and stabbed my flashlight beam at him.

"I've got you covered!" I whispered harshly.

What covered him was my fountain pen held behind the light. Possibly it would look like the barrel of a small gun to him, but what gave me confidence was the fact that his hands were empty. He hadn't expected anybody to come along peering into each car.

For a long moment he did not stir. His shoulders were broad enough to belong to Crooked Nose, but the back of his head was wrong. For one thing, he needed a haircut badly. I didn't have time to think about it. His right hand crawled from the seat to his knee.

"Don't try it," I whispered.

The hand flattened on the seat. His face turned to me. The nose was broad and mashed instead of twisted. I was staring into the ugly face of Larry Goodby.

He left the car quickly, crouching to get through the door, and at the same time his head was high. Probably he couldn't see my face behind the light, but he wasn't looking at my face. His eyes were on the fountain pen. Stepping out of the car, he grinned hideously. As he straightened up, his right hand crossed to his left shoulder.

I dropped my fountain pen and drove my fist into his jaw. He tottered against

the fender and something loose on the car rattled. He groaned. There was too much sound.

"Listen, Breen!" he said, pushing himself away from the car.

I sank my left into his midriff and raised the right to his jaw. He hit the ground.

This was the second time since Monday that I had knocked him out cold without great effort. The truth was that the tough guy had a glass jaw. I had to do it this time because he had a gun, but it was a terrible mistake. I wanted him revived and away from here in a hurry.

My attempt to rouse him produced only a groan. I had done too effective a job. And Milton was coming. In the silent night he had heard the small sounds of the fight. I bent lower over Larry and pulled out of his shoulder-holster a smaller automatic than the one I had taken from him Monday night. As I straightened up, light sprayed me. Milton held his rifle under his left armpit and his finger was ready for business on the trigger.

"Bert!" he panted. "Why the hell —" His light knifed past my shoulder and impaled the brutal face. "Holy cats, Larry Goodby! What happened to him?"

"I found him hiding in this car and knocked him out."

Milton snickered. "Boy, will the boss like this!"

I stood up. "You'd better tell him. I'll watch this mug while you go to the house."

"Socked him with the gat, eh?"

"With my fist. This is his gun."

"Took his gat away from him," he said in awe. "I seen them sweet socks you gave Rufus. I heard tell Lou Darby's boys was tough babies." His tongue clucked. "What d'you know, Larry Goodby! Boy, the boss'll like this."

Larry moaned. An arm lifted feebly and sank back to the ground. Any moment now he would open his eyes, and I couldn't have Milton or anybody else here when it happened. I said testily: "If Moon will like it so much, why don't you go for him?"

"Sure, Bert, but I don't have to go." He stuck two fingers into his lipless mouth and emitted a high-pitched whistle. He repeated it twice. An answering whistle came from the house. "That'll bring 'em."

We waited. Lights went on all over the house. My thumb pushed the safety catch on Larry's automatic. Milton's eyes were off me; I could get the drop on him and take his rifle and flee. But where would that leave Molly? Milton's shouts would warn them of my coming before I could get to the house for her.

There was an alternative. I could shoot Milton with Larry's automatic and Larry with Milton's rifle, and it would appear that they had killed each other in a gun fight. That was a solution for a man who could kill in cold blood. It was none for me. I did nothing.

Rufus Lamb and Beezie came down between the cars. Rufus wore pants and a windbreaker and sneakers and apparently nothing else. Beezie had

thrown a topcoat over maroon pajamas. Each carried a gun and a flashlight.

They looked admiringly at me when Milton told them what had happened. I was worthy of my master, Lou Darby. I had proved myself. But it wouldn't last long. One of Larry's hands fluttered. He would come out of it very soon.

"Should we carry him to the house or wait till he can walk?" Beezie asked.

"Not the house." Rufus frowned at a truck rumbling by on the highway. "We don't want him where maybe somebody'll hear something. Beezie, you get the boss. Bert, you grab his legs."

Milton cut a path for us with his flashlight. As we carried Larry, I watched the lolling head, the closed eyes. Once the eyelids twitched, but did not open. When they did, he would look at me and say my name.

We carried Larry halfway up the hill behind the barn. Rufus and I had put up our guns, and now he took out his and I took out mine. I didn't know what use my gun would be with two of them against me. I wasn't good enough for that. I wasn't even pretty good.

Beezie returned with Tilly, moving slowly to keep his pace down to her labored, waddling ascent. She wore a cloth coat over a white nightgown which came to her ankles. When she reached us, she wheezed like a broken engine and gave me an approving nod. I had at last sold myself to her. That was just dandy.

George Moon and Molly rounded

the barn. I felt myself break up inside. If she had remained in the house, I would have found an excuse to go there and flee with her. Her coming wrecked even that chance. I had done a perfect job. I had handed over to them the one man who could expose me, and through me Molly.

Moon was fully dressed. Molly had got into her blue pajamas with white polka-dots after I had left the room, and now she wore that matching robe over them, and slippers. Clinging to Moon's arm she stepped carefully over the rougher spots on the hillside. Her face was just a white patch behind a light, even after she and Moon had joined the circle of flashlights converging down on Larry. She dropped Moon's arm.

"Nice work, Bert," Moon drawled. "How'd you happen to be out here?"

"I saw a prowler from my window."

"And you came down? And you didn't tell Milton?"

Larry groaned loudly. The others swung their eyes to him, but not Moon. He was looking at me, grinning.

"The fact is I was taking a walk," I said.

"You said you saw him from the window."

"That was earlier. I lost him. Milton will tell you." I glanced at Molly. Her profile could have been cut out of white paper. "I was sore because Clara had gone out with you tonight. I took it out in walking."

Moon's grin tightened. "Nice work, pal," he said, his voice so slow that

I couldn't read anything into it. "I wanted that rat." He prodded Larry's ribs with his toes.

I stepped beside Molly and touched her arm. Her head turned. In moonlight she was very beautiful. Her lips parted, trembled, and closed without sound. She shivered. She must have been chilly in just those sheer silk things, but that wasn't why she shivered.

"Get up, rat!" Rufus said.

Larry's eyes were open. He lay flat on his back, his eyeballs crawling in their sockets. I stepped away from Molly, away from the others, but there were no shadows to hide me. And he knew that I was there. He had said, "Listen, Breen," before I had knocked him out.

"Damn you, get up!" Rufus grabbed his shoulder and yanked at him. Larry rose limply, without resistance, and teetered.

"Where's Breen?" Moon said.

There were three guns against me. Milton's rifle was fixed on Larry's chest; it would be cumbersome at close range. Bizzie was so fascinated by the proceedings that he seemed to have forgotten the revolver in his hand. I would throw the first shot at Rufus who was the most competent and dangerous. But I wouldn't survive. The best I could hope for was that Molly would escape in the confusion.

"You tell me where he is," Larry said.

He meant Adam Breen — me! He knew that I was there, but he wasn't saying. Not yet, anyway. Maybe he was

saving it to bargain with.

Without hurry, without heat, Moon slapped him. Larry staggered. He would have fallen if Rufus hadn't grabbed his arm and held him upright.

"Where's Breen?" Moon said again.

Larry wet his lips. "I didn't snatch him like the coppers say."

"Who is the woman who drove him off last night?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"Why did you come here?"

Larry's tongue flicked out and in. He didn't reply. Moon slapped him again.

Tilly said: "George, why would Larry come here if he'd snatched Breen?"

She had stepped to Moon's side. The shifting fringes of the flashlights sent flickering patches of lights and shadows over the too-tall man and the too-short woman. It made them unreal and ridiculous. He had to bend his neck to look at her. "Then where's Breen?" he said. "Where's the bag?"

"I told you at dinner," Tilly's voice lashed up at him. "But no, you knew everything. The great George Moon! Never even carries a gun. He says he can hire a gun as long as he supplies the brains. But where are the brains? That's what I ask, where are they?"

"Maybe you could supply them," Moon suggested lazily, rubbing his chin with a long, slim hand.

"No, I'm not smart enough. I wouldn't be so smart that I'd frighten Breen into hiding with the bag. And I'd get foolish ideas—like if Larry had got hold of the bag or knew where it

was, this would be the last place he'd come to."

While they bickered, Larry's face came together, to its normal ugliness. Now he said with wheedling eagerness: "Tilly's right, boss. The reason I came here, I want to ask you to take me back. Sure, I made a mistake, but Jasp talked me into it. Give me a break, boss. I know the Florida angle better than anybody. If you'll . . ."

Moon lifted a hand. Larry flinched.

But this time there was no slap. Moon arrested his hand in mid-air and brought it behind himself to his hip pocket for his handkerchief. Delicately he dabbed his lips. "All right, rat, so you haven't got the bag. But you know what happens to rats."

My hand strained on the gun. My cracked knuckles ached. I glanced sideways at Molly and saw her step around the periphery of the flashlight beams. She wasn't leaving. She was angling uphill toward Milton.

"For God's sake, give me a break!" Larry whined brokenly. His eyes darted wildly as if looking for something. "Boss, I swear if you'll . . ."

Molly uttered a startled cry. She stumbled against Milton's rifle. Somebody rushed at me, brushed my arm, went by. I turned my head after him and saw Larry's broad shape running toward the barn.

There was no immediate shot. I looked back at the faces flickering in the sprays of swinging flashlights. Moon had caught Molly after she had stumbled and held an arm about her waist.

Rufus did a weird dance to get around Tilly who was planted between himself and the target. Beezie aimed his revolver. He shot and then Rufus got in a shot, but Larry continued to run downhill. There was a good chance that he would get away, and I was glad.

"I'll get him," Milton said.

He had run forward a few feet and

was down on one knee with his rifle at his shoulder. He took his time. Larry was crossing the flat area in front of the barn when the rifle cracked.

Larry stopped running. He put a hand out as if to steady himself and then started to sink. It took him a long time to reach the ground. Then he lay motionless in the moonlight.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

TILLY WHEEZED, AND SOMEWHERE underfoot an insect set up a shrill clamor. Those were the only sounds in the night. Milton was on the way down the slope to the still shape beside the barn. The rest of us remained on the hillside as if waiting for a curtain to raise on another act.

George Moon's arm remained about Molly's waist. She stood frozen in that position, one shoulder and hip touching him, yet all of her aloof and unyielding. Rufus Lamb was on my left, his gun held negligently, and it might have been only accident that the muzzle was not far from my heart. Beezie and his gun were behind me. I was boxed in. Maybe it wasn't deliberate, but they were fools if it wasn't.

Milton reached Larry. He squatted and rose and waved his rifle. "Got him clean," he called up to us.

George Moon spoke then. "Give Rufus your gun, Bert." He didn't tell Rufus to relieve me of it. Very politely

he was requesting a favor of me.

"I took it from Larry," I said. "That makes it mine."

"I collect trophies, Bert, and that gun would be a nice addition to my collection: I have a number of guns which belonged to guys who tried to buck me and are now dead." There was no menace, not even mockery, in his slow voice.

I could shoot him where he stood, if I didn't hit Molly instead. A moment later Rufus would kill me. Maybe it would be worth it, the fairest deal I could make. But how could I bring myself to act against unreality? There were no violent words, no hostile faces. Not even the two guns in sight seemed to have sinister significance.

I reversed the automatic and handed it to Rufus.

The mood did not change when I was disarmed. Moon drawled: "Bert, didn't you have a chance to plug Larry when he ran past you?" It wasn't an accusation. He was just asking me.

"He took me by surprise, the way he did Rufus and Beezie."

That was a neat thrust and brought mild annoyance to Moon's face. He didn't pursue the subject. He hugged Molly closer. "What happened to you, sweetheart?"

"I tripped," she muttered. "There must have been a rock."

"Where were you going, sweetheart?"

"If there had been shooting, I would have been in the line of fire." Molly ignored the breeze which tugged the lower half of her blue robe open and spread a straggle of hair over her face. "I was stepping out of the way when I tripped."

Scowling, Tilly drew her coat tighter over her nightgown. "It looked to me like she threw herself at Milton."

"Did you see her do that?" Moon asked her.

"Well, I saw her falling." This was one time that Tilly was uncertain about anything. "It seems funny, though, that she should fall right at Milton who had the rifle."

I said angrily: "What the hell is this, anyway? Didn't I deliver Larry to you wrapped and sealed?"

"And a good job you did, Bert." Moon smiled down at Molly's wind-blown hair as he said that. His free hand went around to the pocket of her robe. Two fingers slipped in and brought out her pearl-handled automatic.

Molly threw her head back. "That's mine, George. You can't want it for a

trophy. Put it back in my pocket."

"Can I borrow it, sweetheart? I don't like to carry guns, but if I have to I prefer little ones like this." He gave her hip an affectionate pat and strode down the hill.

The rest of us straggled after him. I waited for Molly. She had not whispered word for me; her gaze was fixed on the flashlight beam I held at our feet. Walking at my side, with her shoulder sometimes brushing my upper arm, she was as aloof from me as she had been from Moon in the circle of his arm.

Milton squatted beside the body, admiring his handiwork. "Got him through the back of the head," he announced proudly. "I don't miss what I see, and the moon was plain on him."

"Take a look at a rat, Bert," Moon told me conversationally. He twirled Molly's gun by the trigger guard. "A few days ago there were two of them, and now there is none. That's what happens to doublecrossers."

Molly stood too straight and her face was too tight, as if she were holding every nerve and muscle rigid. Carefully she did not look at the dead man.

Tilly said viciously: "Don't be so damn cocky, George. Guys get away with bags from under your nose. What are you going to do about that?"

"Get it back," Moon replied evenly. "Breen can't use it himself. He'll get in touch with me and ask a steep price. He thinks because he's hiding out I can't reach him."

Tilly sneered. "There are others who'll pay plenty for it."

The little gun stopped twirling. Moon's big hand snapped over it. "He'll be awful sorry if he tries it, Tilly. Awful sorry."

He moved on with Tilly, leaving Milton and Beezie to dispose of the body. Molly walked between Rufus and myself. Rufus had stuck a gun into each pocket. He was a shadow, a guard, or maybe just a man who wanted company back to the house.

In the downstairs hall the five of us paused. Moon yawned. Rufus opened his windbreaker and scratched his naked chest which was a lot hairier than his scalp. Tilly offered to make coffee; she said she had most of a pie left. It was very amiable. The night air and the business of killing a man had worked up their appetites for a mid-night snack.

"I'm tired," Molly said dully. She paused halfway up the stairs and looked back. "Are you coming, honey?"

I said good night to the others and followed her. She entered the room ahead of me, and when I was closing the door I heard her sob. She stood with her back to me, her shoulders bowed, her face in her hands. The hard core of her had cracked. Now she was only a shaken, weeping woman.

I put an arm about her shoulders. Her face lifted from her hands. She sniffled, and like a little girl she ran the sleeve of her robe over her eyes. "I guess I'm not so tough." She forced the ghost of a smile to the corners of her mouth.

"You said that before," I said. "No,

you're not so tough, and neither am I."

"Tilly was right. I deliberately fell into Milton to give that man Larry a chance to escape."

"I know."

She drew away from me and turned to the dresser for a cigarette. "I don't know why I did it. I had never seen him before. He meant nothing to me, less than nothing. But to see a man killed in cold blood! To stand by and watch it!" A match flared and the flame quivered at the tip of her cigarette. "I had to do something. I would have used my gun, I think, but they were scattered and I couldn't get the drop on them."

"I know how you felt. I would have tried to save him if there had been a chance." I laughed bitterly. "Saved Larry! That's what comes of being civilized. But I had reason to be grateful to him. He didn't give me away."

"He knew it wouldn't have helped him." She opened her robe.

"I'll turn my back while you dress," I said.

"Dress? Do you think they'll let us walk out of here?"

I had been wondering about that. I went out to the hall. Their voices flowed up from the lunchroom. I went halfway down the stairs and listened.

"Didn't he catch Larry for us?" Rufus was saying. "All you got against him is Clara tripped against Milton."

Moon drawled: "If I thought there was anything fishy about it, they'd be joining Larry under the ground this minute. Bert looks pretty good to me. I like the way he took Larry. I can use

him in Florida this winter. Maybe he can be worked in to take Jasper's place."

"And you can use his wife sooner," Tillie snapped. "You can't kid me why you took their guns. You're not sure how Bert will act about you making a play for his wife. You want his teeth pulled till you're sure."

"Bert's a tough baby, boss," Rufus said. "A guy who can handle Larry with his bare hands is plenty tough. You're asking for trouble."

"How about minding your own damn business?" Moon said without heat, and he laughed.

I returned to the room. Molly lay in bed. The cover was up to her waist and her hair was honey spread on the white pillow.

"They're not guarding us," I told her. "They think we're okay. I don't see how they can think anything else after I handed Larry over to them. A cop or a rival gang spy wouldn't have done that."

She closed her eyes. "But Moon took our guns."

"He's playing safe. I heard him say that he plans to send me to Florida."

"And keep me here, I suppose."

"If I let him get away with it. No, he must be sure I wouldn't. Perhaps he plans to kill me in such a way that you wouldn't suspect he did it and then he'll have you for himself. I don't know how a mind like his works. But listen. We can slip out through the side door and in ten seconds be away in your car."

She lay thinking that over. Then she said: "How do we know my car will

start? Maybe he fixed it so that it won't. Maybe he'll have us watched all night. You said you don't know how his mind works. This could be a final test. It's safer to wait till tomorrow. Nothing else will happen tonight."

"And then what?" I said hollowly. "What happens after I get away tonight or tomorrow or the next day?"

Her eyes hadn't opened. Her breasts were taut against the silk pajamas. When she didn't answer, I went to the chair by the window and sat in it.

I sucked my cracked knuckles. "And I did it," I said. "I caught Larry for him, and Larry coming here to spy proved to Moon that he hadn't kidnaped Adam Breen. Now Moon will go after Carol again. He'll hold her as a club over me not to sell the bag to anybody else. What have I accomplished? I'm worse off than when I came here."

She seemed to be asleep. I removed my jacket and shoes and put out the light and returned to the chair. The car lot was quiet and dark. I wondered where Crooked Nose was and who he was and why he had come here. I wondered if Larry was being buried beside other men who had died with bullets in them.

After a while I heard Molly weep again, so softly that her weeping sounded like ragged sighing. I left the chair and sat on the edge of the bed. Her hand, pale in moonlight, reached for mine.

"Lie down here," she whispered.

I stretched out at her side, over the cover. Her face pressed against my

chest. I put an arm under her and her head shifted to my shoulder. My mouth touched her brow and slid down her cheek. I tasted tears and a tragic mouth.

Presently we slept, she under the cover and me on it. We slept in each other's arms like two lost babes in the woods.

The sun was bright in my eyes. Gently I pulled my arm from under her. She moaned and turned on her side and dug her face into the pillow, but she did not awaken.

I slipped off the bed. I was fully dressed except for shoes and jacket, but with my back to the bed I stripped completely and put on the fresh underwear, shirt and socks I had bought yesterday in Badmont. My face looked back at me in the dresser mirror. The bruise on my cheek had darkened still more and my eyes were unfamiliar. I didn't look like myself — older, harder, I wasn't sure what else. A shave might have helped to restore me to normal, but I hadn't brought along the razor Molly had bought me yesterday morning.

When I turned to the bed, Molly lay flat on her back, staring up at the ceiling. I said good morning. Her gray eyes rolled toward me; she didn't reply. She seemed far away.

"I've been thinking," I said. "If I go home, I can't protect Carol any more than I could before I left. I can do more staying here where I can find out in advance what Moon plans."

"You're asking for death."

My fingers knotting my necktie were

bloodless. "Maybe I am. Maybe that's what I want. If I'm dead, they have no reason to bother Carol and Esther."

"A hero." She said it without a sneer.

"No." I got into my jacket. "Or I can kill Moon if that's the only way."

"You can't kill anybody."

"I can make myself if I have to." I looked down at her. "But you're getting out of here at once. I'll go downstairs and give you a chance to dress."

She pushed her cheek into the pillow and closed her eyes. She seemed too tired to do anything but lie there. I went out.

On the way to the bathroom I passed the stairhead. Somebody I couldn't see walked through the downstairs hall. Rufus or Milton or Bezie guarding us? Would I be stopped if I strode boldly out of the house and got into Molly's car? I had to know. I descended the stairs. The hall and the sitting room were empty. I turned into the lunchroom.

Only one person besides Tilly was in the lunchroom, and that was Crooked Nose.

His head was turned toward the hall doorway. I saw him too late to duck out of sight. His pale-blue eyes lay blankly on me. One shoulder crouched over the counter. His body appeared coiled for sudden action, but there was nothing in his face to show that he knew who I was.

"Good morning," Tilly greeted me. Her tone was almost friendly. "We eat breakfast at the counter."

Crooked Nose lifted his coffee cup.

The back of his head was to me now, but I knew that he watched me through the fly-specked mirror behind the counter. It struck me that he was as much afraid of me as I was of him.

"I'll have breakfast later, thanks," I told Tilly.

I skirted the wirelegged table and stepped outside and looked back. Crooked Nose held his coffee cup to his mouth. He said something to Tilly which must have been amusing. A couple of her chins quivered.

Two cars were in front of the building—Molly's coupe and Crooked Nose's Plymouth. George Moon's Chrysler wasn't here. Had Moon left for Brooklyn already? It was twenty after nine and Carol left for school at twenty to. Had he set out early enough to pick her up as she walked to school?

Panic swept over me. I strode across the front of the house to the archway over the cinder driveway and turned to the parking lot. The Chrysler was parked off the driveway.

"Hi, Bert." Beezie sauntered toward me. He was freshly shaven and sleek in his tweed loafer jacket and a tan shirt open at the throat. That wasn't an outfit for working on cars.

"Where's Moon?" I asked.

"Sleeping, I guess. Want him for anything?"

"If I'm going to work here, I'd like to get to work."

"Relax pal. We're getting us a vacation till a couple of things are straightened out. We did all we could with the cars that's here and we're holding off

bringing new ones in."

"Why?"

"What's the use? We got too many already we can't do more work on. It's dangerous having them here in the open."

"Why can't we work on them?" I persisted. "We give them a different paint job and change the seat covers and change their appearance in other ways."

"Say, you don't know the kind of job we do." Beezie looked up at the second-floor windows. I did too, but there was nothing to be seen. "You'll see what a good job when we get working again."

"When will that be?"

Beezie shrugged. "The boss gives the answers. He don't tell us much."

"Has it anything to do with that bag they were talking about?"

"The boss gives the answers."

On the other side of the house a motor started. I listened to the car back out to the road and then I saw Crooked Nose pass in his Plymouth. He may or may not have been rushing away because I had seen him.

I told Beezie I was going in for breakfast. He didn't tag after me back to the house. Molly's coupe now had the narrow parking space in front of the building to itself. I got behind the wheel and unlocked the ignition with the key I had borrowed from her yesterday afternoon. The motor turned over sweetly and I kicked the starter. I made the motor roar and waited for somebody to show excitement over the fact that I was driving away. Nobody seemed to give a damn. I cut the igni-

tion and sauntered into the lunchroom.

Tilly's head lifted from a tabloid spread out on the counter. "Breakfast?" she asked as if hoping that I wouldn't bother her.

"After I wash up."

I went upstairs and turned at the stairhead to the bathroom at the end of the hall. A door behind me opened and Rufus came out of his room. He wore unlaced shoes and pants and nothing else. A towel was over one arm and shaving equipment in the other hand.

"Be in there long, Bert?"

"Only a minute," I said.

Rufus faded back into his room as I pushed open the bathroom door. It opened halfway and then something blocked it. "Anybody in there?" I asked. When there was no answer, I sidled through the opening.

George Moon's long body filled the bathroom. He lay on his face with his head under the wash-basin and his legs behind the door. A thin line of blood had trickled from a cut on his temple to the white tile floor, but that wasn't what had killed him. He must have struck his temple against the basin when he had fallen with a knife in his back. One cheek lay against the floor, and I saw half of his face. A dead face.

I couldn't move. My brain jumped to things that didn't matter at the moment. I studied the bone-handled carving knife between his shoulders and decided that it had come from the lunchroom. He must have been standing at the wash-basin when somebody had entered — somebody he did not fear

to let come up behind him. Then he had died quickly, without enough sound for anybody in the house to have noticed particularly. He couldn't have fallen so precisely along one wall of the bathroom. The killer must have shoved the body into that position so that the door could be opened wide enough for exit.

A car pulled up beneath the bathroom window. I heard Beezie sing out: "Hi, Ed."

The sound of Beezie's hearty voice roused me. I became aware of the bathroom door still partly open. I slipped out into the hall and closed the door and did not quite run to my room.

Molly was out of bed. She had shed her pajama top and was opening the waistband button of the trousers. It was no time for embarrassment. I shut the door behind me and when I looked at her again she had not quite completed turning her back to me.

"Moon is dead," I said. "In the bathroom. A knife in his back."

She stared at me over one bare shoulder. Her mouth was slack, her eyes almost as lifeless as that one dead eye I had seen in the bathroom.

"I didn't kill him," I said. "I found him less than a minute ago. Don't stand there. We've got to get out of here."

She nodded and started to turn to me. Then she remembered and crossed her arms over her breasts. I faced the door. In the hall somebody walked. I gripped the knob, and my split knuckles ached. Rufus had been waiting for his turn in the bathroom. He must have heard me leave.

"Who did it?" Molly said thinly.

"Any of them. Maybe even Crooked Nose. He was in the lunchroom a few minutes ago. Moon might have been lying there for a long time, or it happened while I was downstairs. Whoever murdered him won't have trouble convincing the others we did it. We're the logical candidates. Can't you hurry?"

The steps in the hall returned. Were they coming from the bathroom or from the stairhead? A door opened. Rufus' door, it seemed — from that end of the hall, anyway. I sought for the key to this door and recalled that there wasn't one.

"I think Rufus found him already," I said and turned.

She sat in her red wool dress on the edge of the bed. One stocking was drawn halfway up a bare leg. She was frozen now, bent over and holding the rolled stocking around her calf.

"Are you sure?" she whispered.

"I think so. Maybe we can get out through the window. It's quite a drop, but we'll have to do it. For God's sake, get that other stocking on before it's too late!"

The door flew open. The sharp edge of it caught my head. I stumbled a little and whirled and looked into Rufus Lamb's gun. His chest was still naked. He said: "Yeah, I heard that. It's too late, Bert."

Milton and his rifle were in the hall. He peered into the room and nodded. "Should I get Tilly?"

"Yeah," Rufus said.

Milton moved toward the stairs. His rifle wasn't necessary. Rufus' automatic was enough. It looked like the one I had taken from Larry last night. There was irony in that for anybody who wanted it.

"What's that for?" I asked, nodding at the gun.

"Step back a little, Bert. That's the stuff — I don't want you to hand me one of them socks of yours." Rufus regarded me rather sadly. "Maybe he asked for it, fooling around with your missus. I figured you as a real guy, Bert. You burn somebody down in a fair fight, even the boss, that's one thing. But a knife in the back!"

"You've got it wrong," I said.

"I seen you go in the bathroom. A couple of minutes later I go in and find the boss knifed."

"That's the way I found him too. I came to tell Clara. I was going out to break the news to the rest of you when you barged in."

"Oh, yeah?"

Molly said: "I think Tilly knifed him." She had rolled one stocking all the way up and was holding the second in both hands. She was hardly the same woman she had been a minute ago. Looking at her now, I found it hard to think of her as having wept last night. Her control was back; she was tough-fibered and alert. "Tilly will be the boss now that George is dead," she added and wiggled her bare toes.

"That fat tub!" Uncertainty crossed Rufus' face. He said thoughtfully: "She and the boss was always scrapping. She was always trying to tell him how to run

things. Tilly has ambitions."

Molly and I were doing it again—the team of super-salesmen who could talk a gun out of man's hand. We would play them against each other and all against Tilly, and we would come out of it the way we had before. My stomach fell back into place.

They were coming up the stairs. Somebody raced ahead of the others, probably Beezie. The three of us in the bedroom listened to them move to the bathroom. What little conversation there was at the end of the hall was in inaudible mutters. The steps trickled toward us. Tilly appeared first, looking as grim as any executioner. She waddled past Rufus and leaned her massive hips against the dresser.

"Why'd you kill him, Bert?" she demanded.

"I think you did," I said.

Her chin jumped. She looked as if she'd been kicked in the stomach.

Then an unfamiliar voice said: "What

the hell's Breen doing here?"

The voice shouldn't have been unfamiliar. I had heard it two days ago in the Planet showroom when I had returned from lunch. He stood in the doorway and peered at me over Beezie's shoulder,—the slim man with the too-tight clothes and the empty face, the man sent by Moon to warn me that my family would be harmed if I didn't hand over the bag. Ed Weaver he had said his name was, and while I'd been in the bathroom I had heard him arrive and had heard Beezie greet him as Ed. By any name he spelled death.

"What's that?" Tilly said. "Who'd you say he is?"

"Adam Breen. What the hell's he doing here?"

Voices exploded, but they did not belong to Molly or me. The super-salesmen had run out of the ultimate argument. I looked at her. Her head was bent far over as she pulled on her second stocking.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THEY PUT US IN a hole in the ground. It was somewhat roomier than a grave, but as dark and dank and airless and lonely.

We were under the barn. The floor was hard dirt, the ceiling was the floor of the barn, the walls were jagged field stone. The wooden ladder by which we had descended had been drawn up and

the trap door shut and locked. They had left us without food or water or light, without anything to lie on or sit on, and with only the air which had come down with us through the trap door. Years ago this hole must have been a store-room. Now it was a dungeon to cause resistance to crumple and the mind to die.

I stopped walking the six steps from wall to wall and stood watching the glow of Molly's cigarette. She sat on the damp floor and nursed the last cigarette either of us had left. Her face leaped out of blackness when she drew on it—a ghost face flickering across my vision and vanishing. If not for that dot of light, I would have lost the feeling that she was here with me. She had no tears, no words, not even, I thought, fear. The darkness was a shell into which she had drawn herself.

Two matches remained. I struck one and looked at my wristwatch. It was not possible that only four hours had passed since they had forced us to descend into this hole. I held the watch to my ear and in that silence the ticking was like a pounding heart.

"Twenty after two," I said. "Hungry?"

Her voice was toneless. "No, but I'm terribly thirsty. At eleven last night I had my last drink, and it was beer."

"We won't die of thirst," I said. "We'll suffocate first."

I found myself breathing with my mouth open. We had recklessly burned up much of our air with our cigarettes, but all the same I regretted that there were no more to smoke.

The tip of her cigarette brightened, and I could see the nails of her thumb and forefinger cling to the last half inch. She took a final drag and then tossed it to the ground. Wistfully I watched that feeble light struggle against the blackness and succumb.

Overhead ancient hinges creaked.

Slowly the trap door lifted, sending a growing layer of daylight down to us and a gush of breathable air. Rufus Lamb's bald head and long jaw appeared inverted above us.

"Had enough?" he asked.

I gulped down dryness. "You're not so smart, Rufus," I said. "Tilly killed Moon. She wants to become the boss. If you're in the way, she'll kill you too."

"Never mind Tilly. All you got to worry about is giving me the bag."

"Are you going to let her get away with murdering your boss?"

He grinned mirthlessly. "You're a slick talker, you and the girl, but all the talk I want to hear from you is about the bag. You're in a spot, Bert—I mean Breen. What good will the bag do you down there? Let's have it and we'll forget you knifed the boss."

"I told you Tilly did it."

"You told me lots of things except what I want to know."

"I explained this morning that whoever killed Jasper Vital must have taken the bag."

"Don't make me laugh," he said. "The boss had all the answers. One answer was that you've got the bag."

It was the same merry-go-round I had been on for days, and there was no way off. The back of my neck hurt from looking up. I removed my gaze from Rufus and put it on Molly. She hadn't moved. She sat with her back against the rough field stone and her knees drawn up to her chin. In the light her face was still a ghost face, as static as a portrait.

I said to Rufus: "All right, let's suppose I have the bag. But she can't tell you anything about it. Why not let her go?"

"Who is she?" he demanded. "She ain't Clara Darby. She fooled me neat, but I know she ain't Clara Darby."

Molly didn't answer. This morning in our room she hadn't answered that question either after Ed Weaver had exposed me. Woodenly she had said that it made no difference who she was. And it didn't. Whoever she was, she was in this with me and would die with me.

"I picked her up on the road," I said. "I know nothing about her."

"Fooy! You signed the register husband and wife. You were both in the same room."

"Why not?" I said. "She's pretty and didn't object to spending a night with me. She never heard of the bag till she came here."

Rufus sighed. "You and her can both go if you stop being a dope. A smart guy makes a deal when he's on a spot. Maybe there'll even be a few grand in it for you."

"I haven't got it."

He stood up. All I could see of him were his legs and I noticed for the first time that he was knock-kneed. That was a tremendously unimportant fact, like everything else now but how hard death would come. He said somewhat regretfully: "Looks like you need more time to think it over." The trap door closed.

I put my tired shoulders against the

sweating wall. Across the blackness I heard Molly draw in her breath. That was all, that small snuffle which in any other woman might have been a prelude to tears. But she did not weep. Perhaps she had exhausted a very small capacity for tears last night.

When she spoke, her voice was as lonely as the darkness. "They say dying of thirst is a horrible death. How long does it take?"

"They'd kill us even if I had the bag to give them," I said. "We've seen too much."

"But it would be a quick death."

A raw scream welled up in my parched throat. I choked it off. "You still don't believe I haven't got it. Nobody does. That's why we've got to die."

I started to walk again — six steps, turn, six steps. The other direction, toward Molly's wall, was seven steps, but I didn't go that way.

In the darkness something touched me. I stood very still. Her arm went around my waist. "Hold me, honey!" She said. "Don't ever let me go!"

I pulled her against me. My mouth groped for hers and found it seeking mine, and we were no longer alone in that sightless, tragic world of ours. After a while we sat on the ground on my jacket. My back was against the wall and her head on my shoulder. There was thirst and hunger and darkness and so little time left, but there was also the feel of her in my arms, and that was good. That was the only good left.

Time had remained above ground with the sun and the stars. An hour or

ten hours passed before either of us spoke. Then she said: "Adam?"

"Yes?"

"Are you thinking about your wife?"

"About Carol mostly. I've had years with Esther — not enough, but we've had lots of good times together. But Carol — she's not yet seven and I've known her only half her life. I've missed all those years when she was changing from an infant to a grown child. It's hard to put into words. You've got to be a parent yourself to understand."

"I understand, honey."

"When I was in the army here, and then overseas, I wanted Esther all the time, but not as much as I wanted Carol. I don't mean that I loved Esther less. It was different. I would return to Esther the way I'd left her. But Carol —" I licked dry lips with a dry tongue. "The biggest thing in life is watching your children grow up. Maybe in this rotten world of ours it's the only big thing there is."

"Poor Adam." Her warm hand touched my cheek.

"Damn it, don't pity me!" I said. "I'll only die and it will be over for me, but Carol won't have a father and Esther a husband. They won't even be able to put flowers on my grave because they'll never know if I'm alive or dead."

My voice trailed off. I was no longer aware of her in my arms. I had left the hole for an ugly red-brick house in Brooklyn.

"We had plans," I heard myself say. "We made them when Carol was born. There would be three children. Then

the war came and we put it off. That was a mistake; we should have had one of the children anyway, but we didn't. Then when I returned, there weren't any cars to sell and I hadn't much income and we put it off. Then last week Esther decided that it was time. I was making pretty good money again. If we were lucky, we would have one child next year and the other two years later. Neatly planned parenthood, the way the books tell you to do it. We wanted our second child to be a boy. The sex of the third wouldn't matter. In fact, if they were all girls I wouldn't care. Three girls like Carol . . ."

Abruptly I tore myself away from Molly and crossed to the farther wall and stood there breathing hard. I heard her follow me. Her hands slid up under my armpits. I stood rigid, unyielding.

"Adam, it's all right. You can hold me and tell me about your wife."

"Listen," I said. "I love Esther."

"She's in the world outside. We've nothing left but each other. Hold me."

I wanted to and I did. In my arms she was firm and soft and strong and weak. Presently we sat on the floor. The air was better down there — comparatively better.

"You haven't asked me about myself," she said with her mouth on the side of my jaw.

"Do you want me to?"

She took a long time replying. "There's nobody who'll miss me — not even my father, I think. That's even worse than having people who'll be hurt when you're gone."

"You don't have to tell me anything."

"I'm a girl who made the mistake of not meeting a decent boy like you years ago. That's all there is."

We were quiet then. Perhaps she dozed off. She was so still against me that she could have been asleep or, like me, staring into the darkness.

When the trap door opened, it was night in the outer world. A flashlight beam knifed down and crawled over the floor until it found us. The unaccustomed light hurt my eyes. I did not look up or even shift my position. All I could see of Molly was her hair in my face.

"Ready to talk?" Rufus said.

Crooked Nose, I thought. By the process of elimination, he was the only one who could have taken the bag. I had mentioned him this morning, but Tilly had insisted that I was trying to make a red herring out of somebody I'd happened to see eat in the lunchroom a couple of times. Bringing up his name again would be as useless as asking for water. My parched throat was too tired for unnecessary speech.

"He'll talk plenty when he gets thirstier," Rufus said.

Tilly was up there with him. I heard her snort. "What's the sense waiting? Maybe it'll take days before he breaks. For all we know, he told somebody he was coming here. My way will get it out of him right away."

"It's too early," Rufus said doubtfully.

"We can wait three hours. That'll be just about midnight."

The light leaped out of the hole and

the trap door banged shut. I felt the tightening pressure of Molly's embrace.

The brilliance of the midnight moon swept the stars from the sky. Greedily our lungs drew in crisp September air. It was a good night for living and loving. No night was good for dying.

Tilly and Ed Weaver led the procession up the hill behind the barn. Molly and I followed, flanked by Rufus and Beezie. Milton and his rifle brought up the rear. Our wrists were tied behind our backs. They were taking no chance that Molly would run for it as Larry had last night, or that I would put up a fight in spite of their guns. They did not want to kill either of us except in a special way.

"See that hump up there?" Rufus said when we were half way up the hill. "That's our private reservoir for the house and lot. We pump the water up into it from a gravel well near the barn and gravity brings it down again. Milton says the tank is half-full now. It'll take maybe three hours of pumping before the water's over your nose. Less for the girl."

Behind us Milton gave the dry snicker of an evil old man.

Molly stumbled. Rufus, whose hand was on her elbow, yanked her upright. Everybody paused. She stood trembling, waiting for strength to return to her legs.

Tilly impaled us with her flashlight. "Why don't you two get smart?" She wheezed from the climb. "We're not anxious to pollute our water supply."

I said without hope of getting anywhere: "You're the one who's stupid. Can't you see that I wouldn't have held out this long if I had it?"

"But you know where it is."

"I don't."

Viciously her flashlight arched upward and went out. We resumed the ascent by moonlight.

The reservoir was another hole in the ground, smaller than the one out of which we had just come, with another trap door. Only a couple of feet of the concrete walls were visible above the wild grass. Milton fished a key out of his denim overalls, mounted the flat wooden roof of the reservoir and unlocked the trap door.

"The girl first," Tilly said.

Rufus tugged her toward the reservoir. Milton came down from the roof and took her other arm. She did not hold back, or whimper, or beg for mercy. There seemed to be no bones in her face, but her step was firm and her carriage erect.

She could die well. She could do everything well.

Beezie and Ed Weaver were holding me. I felt myself buck against their grips; I heard myself make animal noises in my throat. They braced themselves, clinging to me, Rufus and Milton stopped as they were about to push Molly up on the roof and looked back. With my arms free, I might have broken a jaw or two, but my futile thrashing was only a demonstration of fear. I forced myself to subside, and I spun my head to Tilly.

"Why her?" I cried in a voice that wasn't mine. "She doesn't know anything. She can't tell you anything."

Tilly was as solid and low and unshakable as the boulders planted on the hillside. "She came with you. If she doesn't know, it's up to you to save her and yourself. But I think you both know."

A thin exclamation cut the night. There was a splash and then silence.

When I turned my head back to the reservoir, Milton and Rufus were alone on the roof. They peered down through the trap door. "She's come up," Milton announced. "Say, Tilly, they'll last longer if we untie their hands."

"They'll last long enough."

Beezie and Ed Weaver yanked at my arms. Rufus and Milton reached down. I was pushed and pulled to the roof. Somebody leaped away from in front of me, somebody shoved hard against my back, and suddenly there was nothing under my feet. Momentarily I was checked by my shoulder smacking the side of the trap door, then the water came at me. I fell sideways into its outrageous coldness. Automatically I kicked out. One foot scraped against a wall; my head bobbed up by itself. My knees found support on the concrete floor, and I felt air on my face.

I remained kneeling in the reservoir with my chin barely out of the water. My tongue, remembering its thirst, licked wet lips. I lowered my head and drank.

"Anyway, we won't die of thirst," Molly said in a voice which struggled

to be flippant.

She had pressed herself into a corner to avoid being struck by my body as it hurtled down. Moonlight slanting through the opening above covered her mellowly. The water reached her waist, and her wet wool dress was plastered to her splendid body. Her mouth was twisted into a grimace which was supposed to represent a smile at the grim joke she had just made, but she was breathing hard and shivering.

I squirmed to my feet. Directly overhead faces hung under a cloudless sky. They were without individuality, as blurred as if seen through tears. One of the faces spoke in Rufus Lamb's voice. "When you're ready to sing, we'll hear you."

The faces pulled away. I glimpsed legs and then light was blocked out as if by a shutter closing. Darkness as complete as in that other hole closed in on us with the banging of the trap door.

Outside Tilly said: "Beezie, you and Ed go down and turn on the pump. And stay there. I don't want the house and lot left alone."

Water swished gently in the hole. Molly's shoulder touched my upper arm. With our wrists tied behind us, we could not hold each other. Even that small comfort was denied us. We could only stand face to face and press our soaked bodies together.

"The cold, honey." Her breath was on my wet cheek as she spoke. "I won't be able to stand long."

"Let's find a wall to lean against."

We moved together through water.

A wall stopped us. Face to face, we stood against it. Snatches of muttered conversation from the outside world drifted in, but what they said could not be important to us. They could do no more to us than they were doing, and they would do no less. The side of Molly's face rested on my shoulder and I felt her mouth on my neck. God, how I wanted to touch her with my hands!

Abruptly water gushed down on our heads. The pump had been turned on and we were standing under the inlet pipe. That was the ultimate indignity. Fresh from the well, the water was a shower of ice. It beat us down, tore us apart. I hit against another wall and realized that I had lost Molly.

"Are you all right, Molly?"

The blackness laughed brokenly, not quite sanely. "I'm wonderful. The only thing that bothers me is that I'm slightly wet."

"Where are you?"

"Here. I'll always be close to you, honey. They'll even bury us together."

Blindly I waded. There could not be many feet between us anywhere in that small hole. My body found hers. I felt her sag. Her chin dug into my chest.

"Don't let yourself go to pieces," I said.

She started to laugh again and chopped it off at the first gasp. I felt her straighten against me. "Why not go to pieces?" she said. "What difference will it make?"

"None maybe, except that it'll make it harder for the one who's left."

"I guess so," she said emptily.

A wall was a step away. We leaned against it and listened to water from the inlet pipe striking water in the reservoir. Little waves rippled about my hips and now and then drops splashed into my face. Very close I heard a weird clicking sound. For a while I wondered about it before I recognized it as Molly's teeth chattering. My own teeth were locked on my lower lip.

"Honey, they say drowning is an easy death," she said. "Not like dying of thirst."

"That's consoling."

"It's waiting like this that's so terrible. We don't have to torture ourselves. I'm going under."

"No!"

"Why not? All I have to do is let myself go. Why not, Adam?"

"For God's sake, Molly, wait!"

"Wait for what? For the water to reach up for me? Rufus said it would take a few hours. I couldn't stand on my feet that long, anyway. But why should I stand and wait. Why?"

There was no answer that made sense, but a dying man does not ask for sense. He wants only to cling to life, beyond hope, beyond reason.

"Maybe they'll change their minds and let us out," I said.

"You're kidding yourself, honey. I don't mind dying. I've nothing to live for."

"Goddamn it, I have!"

"I know," she said quietly, sadly. "Your wife, your daughter, your two children who'll never be born now. I'm sorry I got you into this."

"Don't talk like that. It was my own idea."

"No." She dug her shivering body into mine. "Kiss me, honey."

"Don't let go."

"Not for a while yet. Kiss me."

I dipped my head and all at once I could see her face. Our lips did not quite touch. A flashlight beam angled down from the trap door.

"They're still on their feet," Rufus said. Then he spoke to us. "How do you like it down there?"

I waded to a spot under the trap door. "I haven't got it!" I yelled up at him. "I haven't, I haven't, I haven't! Can't you understand, I haven't got it?"

The flashlight went out. I could see Rufus now. Moonlight showed him squatting at the side of the trap door opening. He faced somebody who was not on the roof.

"We're up the wrong alley," he said. "A mummy would talk."

"He's got to have it," Tilly's voice replied savagely.

"One will get you fifty he ain't. What's he got to lose by talking now? He ain't even tried to make a deal."

There was a silence. Rufus looked off to his left and tugged at his long jaw. Then Tilly said: "Close that trap door."

"What'll that get us except we'll have to clean out the reservoir after we fish them out?" Rufus protested.

"So we'll clean it out. He's figuring we'll get soft at the last minute."

"Nuts! A mummy we put down there would talk."

"What do you suggest, that we let

them go?"

"We sure can't do that." Rufus' face turned down to me. "Here it goes, pal. Anything you want to say first?"

My chin sank to my chest. Darkness returned with a crash. I had had my last look at anything I would ever see. My legs were dragging weights as I waded back to where I had left Molly.

My body touched a wall. She wasn't there. I moved along the wall and reached a corner, and still she wasn't there.

"Molly!" I screamed. "For God's sake, Molly!"

The blackness said quietly: "I'm here."

I had gone to the wrong wall. I found her leaning against another wall and pressed myself against her.

"I wouldn't go down without telling you first." Her lips fluttered against mine. "Did you notice how high the water is?"

"It feels higher."

"It's reached my breasts. And my legs are so tired and numb. Even if I wanted to wait to the end I couldn't."

"Wait a little longer."

She laughed, but with little hysteria now. "For Rufus to rescue us? If he does, honey, it'll be to take us out and shoot us so that our corpses won't spoil the water supply."

"Wait," I said.

"I'll try, honey."

Time was measured by the rising of the water level. Molly was very quiet

now. We would die well, I knew, which meant that we would not make too much fuss. The noisy deaths were for the sound effect of radio shows. I had seen enough of death in bombed cities and just behind the front; and to soldiers and civilians alike it came not with a bang or a whimper, but in the end with weary acceptance. It would come softly to us, like falling asleep. Very soon now I would suddenly be aware that she no longer stood against me. There would be nothing for me to wait for then. I would simply fold my knees and breathe the water into my lungs . . .

"What's that?" Molly said hoarsely.

I awoke as if from a drugged dream. The voices outside were louder than they had been before.

"Probably Tilly and Rufus arguing," I muttered indifferently.

"No, listen." Her cheek moved away from the side of my jaw.

"There's the trap door!" somebody outside exclaimed. "Hurry!" And feet thumped on the roof.

Molly stiffened against me. I tilted my head. The trap door started to lift. I watched a patch of sky appear, and then a light blinded me.

"They're alive!" a man shouted.

The light left my eyes and lay on the water. Another light stabbed out from somewhere off the road and momentarily illuminated a face hovering above us.

It was a face with a twisted nose and a deeply cleft chin.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I WAS AWAKENED for breakfast. I looked at the small creamy-tan room and at the nurse who was wheeling a bed tray toward my chest. A window on my left framed a grassy slope falling sharply away into morning mist and rising distantly on the other side of the valley.

"Is this Badmont?" I asked the nurse.

"Well, of course. Don't you remember being brought here?"

I remembered that I had sat huddled in the back seat of a sedan. My soaked outer clothing had been on the floor at my feet and a couple of coarse but snug blankets had covered me to my chin. Molly had been in another police car right behind us. All the way there Lieutenant Batterman, who was mostly belly and jowls, had prodded me into talking when what I had wanted was sleep. And sleep had won out over the lieutenant before we had reached our destination. I remembered now having been put to bed somewhere, but I hadn't known where or by whom and hadn't cared. The bed had been the important thing.

It still was. I yawned mightily. "What's wrong with me?"

"Nothing that food and rest won't cure. Eat your breakfast."

My eyes refused to remain open. Between orange juice and a soft-boiled egg I dozed off. The nurse shook me.

"A phone," I muttered. "Got to call my wife."

"You must eat first, Mr. Breen."

I fell asleep again over the coffee.

When I awoke, the tray was gone

and I was alone in the room. My eyelids were heavy and my head dull and there was a gnawing emptiness in my stomach, but I had felt worse the morning after a late party. I rang for the nurse. The same one came in. She was a matronly woman in her fifties who looked like a magazine drawing of somebody's mother.

"I'm starved," I said.

"It's twenty to twelve. Can you wait till twelve?"

"If I have to," I said. "What I want most is a phone. I have to call my wife."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Breen, but we have no phone attachments in the rooms. We're not like the big city hospitals. We have only ten beds."

"There must be a phone somewhere in the hospital."

"I'm sorry, but you can't leave your bed till Dr. Cadmar examines you."

"Well, why the hell doesn't he examine me?"

She said patiently: "Dr. Cadmar has been called away. He'll be back soon."

As soon as she left the room, I slipped out of bed and went to the tiny corner closet. I didn't expect to find my water-ruined clothes, but I hoped there would be a robe to wear over my ridiculous cotton nightgown. There wasn't.

The door started to open. I scurried back to the bed like a small boy who heard a parent approach his room. I had the cover over me when Crooked Nose entered.

"How are you?" His pale-blue eyes

were, after all, capable of expression. They were mildly friendly now.

"Good enough," I said. "Will you do me a favor? Phone my wife and tell her I'm all right."

"A little while ago the Crane girl spoke to her. I met her in the hall and we looked in on you and saw you were asleep. She said your wife ought to know you were safe and sound. She called her up from the booth."

"She's swell," I said. "How is she?"

"Up and about, like I said. That's the way women are, more resilient than men." He sat on the chair beside my bed and crossed his legs and pulled out cigarettes and offered me one. "Swell-looker," Crooked Nose said. "What do you know about her?"

"Molly?" The smoke felt good inside me. "Last night you told me your name, but I've forgotten it."

"Booth Mawrey."

"You're a detective, you told me."

"Private." He rolled the tip of his cigarette on his lips. "Why don't you want to talk about Molly Crane?"

"She writes. She came with me to get a story."

"What does she write for, a magazine or a paper?"

I said carefully: "I think she freelances, sells her stuff to any editor who wants it. But I'm not sure. Why don't you ask her if you want to know?"

Booth Mawrey twitched his twisted nose and went to the dresser for an ashtray.

"A private detective," I said. "Who hired you?"

"A group of insurance companies." He brought the ashtray to the chair. "They don't like to pay out money for stolen cars, and the official police weren't getting anywhere. Moon was suspected of being kingpin, but he was too smart and had too much political influence. I spent a whole month just trying to get a line on members of his organization. That's how I come to you. One of Moon's top men, Raymond Teacher, got hit by a car and a woman named Mrs. Breen drove him to the hospital. Probably no connection, but my job consists of chasing a hundred tangents in the hope that one will lead somewhere. Right off I found out that Mrs. Breen's husband worked for a car dealer."

"That also impressed Jasper Vital and Larry Goodby."

"Sure. They didn't know the setup in Brooklyn, so they saw the same possibility I did. Redfern Motors could be an outlet for hot cars. In stories there's a lot of blood and thunder connected with the detective business. Don't kid yourself. It means hanging around a house for hours or days and waiting for a break that mostly doesn't come. I thought I had one when a swanky heap pulled up to your house and a couple of guys paid you a visit. One of them — I didn't know then he was Larry Goodby — was a mug if I ever saw one. So when you and the mug came out, there I was right behind you."

I said dryly: "Lieutenant Woodfinch thought I'd made up Larry to alibi myself. You could have told him Larry

existed and that I'd knocked him out."

"I had a job to peddle my own papers." Booth Mawrey smiled bleakly. "Telling the police or the D. A.'s office anything was the same as telling Moon. I was keeping myself under wraps. Of course, I'd have spoken up if they were ready to burn you, but they weren't up to that."

"I shouldn't complain. You saved my life last night."

He brushed that aside with a wave of his hand. "Sheer accident. A guy like me has to have connections. I picked up word about a car lot near Badmont. As soon as I got there, I spotted the setup."

"It couldn't be missed once you knew. That they were in the stolen car racket."

"Sure, if you were looking for it. But that was one sweet location, just inside the state and forty miles from the nearest New York town of any size. There wasn't much in that sparsely populated area to take the New York State police so close to the state line, and at the same time the car lot wasn't so isolated that it would look phoney. For practical purposes it was right outside a town — Badmont. But the Badmont law, what there is of it, has no jurisdiction there, and the same goes for the New Jersey State police, and where there's no jurisdiction there's no interest. You know the blind spot every eye has, where the muscles meet. That car lot was in the blind spot of the police eye. And the gang had sense enough not to steal New York or New Jersey cars."

"They ran them up from Florida," I said.

"From a number of resort places, though a lot came from the Florida east coast, from Daytona Beach to Miami. I've known that for weeks. In winter Florida is flooded with cars from every state in the union. They'd swipe a car and run it up over state lines all the way to Badmont, changing the license plate every few hours. Some of them were nabbed on the way, but not many. Out-of-state cars are no novelty going south or north along the east coast during the winter, and hot cars came from so many different states that the local cops were balled up. How effectively they worked it is proved by the fact that they got away with it for a couple of years at least."

"Jasper Vital headed the Florida end of the job."

"That was no secret to me," Mawrey said. "I'd never seen him, but I'd heard of him when I was getting a line on Moon's organization. I also heard that he figured Moon was taking too large a share of the profits and had come north with blood in his eye. Well, like I said, I got to the car lot and knew what was what, but proving it was something else."

"I saw you looking at cars with a fountain pen flash."

"Was that you who chased mé?" He burst into laughter when I nodded. "Boy, that's rich! I saw somebody coming and did I scoot. I was having a look at Chryslers, which have the serial numbers on the door frames. I was trying to match the numbers I found with a list of numbers of recently stolen cars."

"Did they match?"

"No. Moon and his gang did a wonderful job on the hot cars. When trying to find evidence that way got me nowhere, I saw my one chance was a police raid and then an examination and checkup of every car there. So yesterday I went to the New York State police zone headquarters and laid what I had on the table. It was good enough for me, but not for Lieutenant Batterman. He couldn't pull a raid on the say-so of a shamus without a single thing to back it up. But I had a card up my sleeve. I'd seen you there that morning, and the Brooklyn cops wanted you."

"So the one honest man in the place was the excuse for the raid?"

Mawrey grinned. "That's the way it turned out. I didn't know you were honest. To me you were a reason for the cops to move in. Batterman phoned Woodfinch and Woodfinch said you'd either been kidnaped and were held there against your will or you were a material murder witness who'd taken a powder. That was good enough. It was night by then. We waited a few hours longer to be sure everybody would be in that was going to be in. Lucky for you and the Crane girl we didn't delay it more than that."

"Very lucky. How did you know what was happening at the reservoir?"

"For a few minutes the raid looked only half successful. I'd hoped that we would nab Moon himself with the evidence. We caught only two of them, Ed Weaver and Beezie Jones, if that's his real name. Weaver clammed up,

but the kid went to pieces when he saw uniforms and he talked enough to make us scoot up the hill. We skirted around to the other side of the hill and up through the woods there and swarmed over Tilly Ames and Rufus Lamb and Milton Curry. And here you are."

I asked him for another cigarette. He held a light for me. I put my head back against the pillow and blew smoke at the ceiling.

"What about the bag?" I said. "You must know what's in it."

"The fact is that I never heard of it until you told Lieutenant Batterman about it after we fished you out of the reservoir. Lieutenant Woodfinch didn't mention it to the newspapers and I'd never spoken to him." Mawrey ran the side of his thumb through the deep cleft in his chin. "As for Tilly and Lamb and the others, they aren't saying. Even Beezie recovered from his jitters and lost his memory. They never heard of a bag. They never heard of a hot car racket. They never heard of a couple of men you and the Crane girl say were murdered."

"Weren't the bodies found?"

"Not yet."

"Why do they say they put Molly and me in the reservoir?"

"That's the only charge they're being held on so far. It was just a gag, they say. Jasper Vital was one of her dearest pals, Tilly says, and she wanted to make you confess that you'd killed him. No harm meant, of course; you'd have been pulled out before you could drown. But I'm not worried about evidence.

Those cars in the lot won't stand up under a thorough check. And sooner or later one of the gang will start spilling his guts to cop a minor sentence for turning state witness. That always happens when there's a gang."

The nurse came in with my lunch. Mawrey watched me eat. He waited until the nurse left and then said: "The Crane girl isn't a writer."

"No?"

"She claims she's your girl friend. She says she was on the way to pick you up in her car when Larry slugged you. You saw a chance to pretend you were snatched by Larry so that Moon would let your wife and kid alone. She says that then she went to Tilly's with you because she's that way about you."

I said nothing. Humbly I bowed before a super-salesman. If ever I went into the business of selling broken-down jalopies, I'd want to hire her to persuade customers that they were practically new cars. She could sell anything.

"Don't worry, Breen," Mawrey said with half a leer. "The police haven't anything to gain by telling your wife of your extra-marital activities."

I think I blushed. "So why bring it up?" I said.

"There's something else. Lieutenant Batterman called up her father this morning to make sure she was who she said she was. Purely routine."

The lamb chop stopped halfway to my mouth. I waited.

"Her old man's a doctor in Baltimore," he said. "When Dr. Crane heard it was the police asking about his

daughter, he said he wasn't surprised that she was in trouble and wasn't interested and hung up."

My teeth closed over the bone. I chewed the meat off and spoke with it in my mouth. "Dr. Crane doesn't approve of his daughter playing around with a married man."

"Is that all it is?"

"That's all," I said and chewed.

He studied me through smoke and then stood up. "Be seeing you," he said and went out.

The only thing wrong with that meal was that there wasn't enough of it. I rang for the nurse and prevailed on her to bring me a second helping of lamb chops and potatoes, and also a robe and slippers. She conceded that a man with my appetite was strong enough to leave bed, but I wasn't to leave the room before Dr. Cadmar said so. In robe and slippers I sat in the chair and meekly gnawed chops until she left. Then I made for the door.

I didn't reach it. The door opened from the outside and four big men oozed in. Booth Mawrey was one of them and the other three were cops. With the car-lot in one state, Molly and I in a hospital in another, and Jasper Vital murdered in Brooklyn, it was a jurisdictional tangle. Lieutenant Batterman was there for the State of New York, a sergeant named Harrison for the State of New Jersey, Booth Mawrey for the insurance companies, and Detective Scavuzzo had come up from Brooklyn for the City of New York.

"I didn't get your complete state-

ment last night, Mr. Breen," Lieutenant Batterman said. "We'd like it now if you're strong enough."

That room hadn't been constructed to hold five over-sized men, including myself, and I talked against a solid semicircle of bodies. But they weren't hostile bodies. For the first time since Monday I had a feeling that cops weren't necessarily boogeymen.

When I finished, Lieutenant Batterman nodded approvingly. "You've been very cooperative. But there's one thing we're not sure of."

"The bag?" I said. It always came back to that.

"That's another thing, but not as important just now. An hour ago we found both bodies by looking for a spot which had recently been dug up. There was, of course, no trouble identifying George Moon, and from your description we know that the other one is Larry Goodby. Milton Curry confessed that he shot Goodby. We had him cold; he knew that slug in Goodby's head will match his rifle. He claims he shot Goodby in self-defense."

"That's not the way it was," I said.

"We know it wasn't. You and Miss Crane made separate statements and they agree in every detail. But what about Moon?"

"I told you I found him dead in the bathroom."

"Tilly claims you stuck the knife in George Moon. Her story now is that they put you and Miss Crane in the reservoir to make you confess."

I said: "If she was sure I'd killed

Moon, why did she want to make me confess? To turn me over to the police?"

Their faces showed that they liked what I said. They were the faces of pals, guardians of the law who were being paid to protect men like me from criminal gangs. It was pleasant to be invited by the police back into the family of respectable citizens.

Scavuzzo spoke for the first time since he'd said hello to me. "They're not kidding anybody. They were after the bag."

"What do they say about it?" I asked.

"They're not saying any more than they have to," Batterman told me. "But they will. We've got every one of them on plenty of charges already. Thanks for your cooperation, Mr. Breen."

I gave them time to disperse outside and then stuck my head out of the room. No nurse was in sight. I padded up the short hall to the small, square lobby. An old, old woman knitting a glove sat behind a bleached oak desk. Her gnarled hands made the intricate arrangement of needles flash as she listened benignly to Detective Scavuzzo. His hat was in one hand and his cigar in another and he punctuated a sentence with a low, nasal laugh. He was probably quite a card with old women.

The solidity of his bulk so near the exit brought back to me the choking feeling of being hunted.

I went up to him. "Are you waiting for me?"

He lifted his head. "You want to ride back with me? A cab's picking me up to drive me to the train."

"Didn't you come to Badmont to arrest me?"

He put his hat on his head and his cigar into his beefy face and nodded toward a bench. Together we walked the few steps to it, but we didn't sit down. "You going to make us extradite you because you're in another state?"

"As soon as they let me out I'm heading for Brooklyn."

Scavuzzo beamed suddenly and thumped my arm. "I was just kidding about extraditing you. Stop worrying, Mr. Breen. We know you haven't got the bag — not if you didn't open your face when they put you in the reservoir. And if you haven't got the bag, you didn't kill Vital. Besides, Mawrey told me your story about Larry Goodby taking you for a ride was on the level, so that's another reason we don't think you killed Vital. Maybe if there were a couple of things you told us that didn't stand up in cross-checking we'd get tough. But it all does, Mr. Breen, it does."

"What about Lieutenant Batterman?" I asked.

"He's satisfied. When he wants you for a witness, he'll send for you. The same goes for us." He looked at his watch. "That cab should be here."

I turned to the phone booth in a corner and then back to Scavuzzo. "Would you mind lending me a nickel?"

"Sure thing. You want to call the missus, eh?" He dug change out of his pocket. "You'll need more than a nickel."

"I just want to get the operator, then I'll reverse charges. Thanks."

I felt myself tighten up as I folded my legs into the booth. Then I heard the operator ask Esther if she would accept the reversed charges and I couldn't wait and blurted: "Esther!"

"Adam! Oh, darling!" And at the other end of the wire Esther began to sob.

The operator discreetly retired. I said: "Didn't somebody call you to tell you I was all right?"

"Yes, a newspaper reporter. A Miss Crane who had visited me just before you — you disappeared." Her voice cracked. She strove to control it. "Miss Crane tried to reassure me, but why didn't you call yourself? I couldn't believe that you weren't at least terribly injured."

"I was sleeping."

"How are you, darling?"

"I'm fine. I'll be home in a few hours."

"But what —" Esther's voice shifted from the mouthpiece. I heard her say: "Yes, yes, it's Papa. Of course . . . Darling, Carol wants to speak to you."

Then there was Carol's voice, shrill and excited. "Papa, what happened? Where are you, Papa?"

I couldn't speak. I gulped and forced words out. "How are you, sweetheart?"

"Papa, where are you?"

"I was away on business. I'll be right home."

"Papa, I missed you."

"Yes, sweetheart," I said thickly.

Esther came back on the wire. "Darling, listen, I found it."

"It?"

"The bag."

I had left the booth door open a few inches for air. Now I closed it. I stared at the phone.

"Adam, are you there?" Esther said.

"Where did you find it?"

"In the garage."

"The garage?"

"You didn't put it there, Adam?"

I said wearily: "You think I did?"

"No. Oh, I didn't know. I was so frightened and worried and confused."

"Did you get in touch with the police about it?"

"I couldn't," she said slowly. "I was afraid that — that . . ."

"That I'd hidden it there and that you'd give me away?"

"Darling, please don't talk like that. I told you how confused I was. I thought I should look inside first. I couldn't open the lock, so I cut the bag."

"Don't let that worry you," I said. "The police will understand."

"But, darling, there's nothing in the bag."

"It's empty?"

"I mean there's nothing valuable. Just a bunch of old tools."

"Oh," I said.

There was a brittle silence. Then Esther said: "Don't you see what the police will think? They'll think you took out whatever was in it and put some old tools in to give it weight. Oh,

darling, I'm so —"

I laughed. "It's all right, baby. You can stop thinking that I stole what was in the bag."

"I don't. Please don't think I do."

"Stop worrying. There never was anything else in the bag."

"But, darling —"

"I said it's all right. I'll be home in a few hours."

"Hurry!"

I hung up and left the booth. The old, old woman in white looked up from her knitting.

"Which room is Molly Crane in?" I asked.

"Molly Crane?" She chewed on the name and came to a decision. "She's that very pretty girl. She left an hour ago. No, more than an hour. At least an hour and a half."

"Did she leave a message for me?"

"You're Mr. Breen, aren't you? Room Six." She peered at an absolutely blank pad on the desk. "There is no message."

By a matter of seconds I beat my nurse and Dr. Cadmar into my room. The doctor looked me over and wanted to know what a healthy man was doing in a hospital. I said the same thing was bothering me. The nurse brought in my clothes neatly pressed and the contents of the pockets in an envelope and a bill from the hospital. I threw on my clothes and paid the bill and headed for home.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THEY HEARD ME UNLOCK the door and they ran out into the hall from the kitchen. I gathered Carol up with one arm and threw my other arm about Esther. Carol's mouth was on my cheek as I dipped my head to kiss Esther. I was home.

"Papa, where were you?" Carol said. "Why were you gone so long?"

"I was away on business, sweetheart."

I set Carol down and put both hands on Esther's hips. She looked as if a vampire had been feeding on her. With a sob, she pushed herself hard against me and I . . .

"Papa, Allen Gillette said the police are going to arrest you." Carol tugged at my sleeve. "Allen's a big liar, isn't he, Papa?" She hopped on one foot. "The police aren't going to arrest you, are they? Huh, Papa?"

"Nobody wants to arrest me." Without moving my body from Esther's, I fished a handful of change out of my pocket. "I meant to bring you a present, Carol, but I didn't have time. Here's some money. Go to the candy store and buy yourself something."

"All for me?" Avidly she counted the money. "A dollar and forty-three cents! Can I buy ice cream, Mommy?"

Esther lifted her head from my chest. "It's too near supper, dear. Buy a toy."

"Let her buy ice cream," I said. "Buy anything you want, Carol."

"Gee, Papa!" Skinny legs flashed, the door slammed, and Carol was gone.

I chuckled. "I don't think I'd want

her out of my sight so soon. As long as it isn't for more than a very little while." I looked down at Esther. "Was it tough while I was gone, baby?"

"Oh, darling, why didn't you at least phone me? You can't imagine what I went through."

I led her into the living room and sat on the club chair and pulled her down on my lap. She cuddled on me as soft and cozy as a kitten. I told her about those three days. Not quite everything. I skimmed over the worst of it, especially in the holes, and I didn't stress Molly Crane. The way I told it, Molly was a newspaper reporter who had no interest except in an exclusive story, and she had been something of a nuisance to me.

"And all the time the bag was in the cabinet in the garage," I said. "If I had known, we could have been spared everything that happened after Monday night."

Esther's head twisted on my arm. "How did you know it was in the cabinet? I didn't tell you."

"Where else could it have been in the garage?"

"Who put it there?" she said thinly.

"Jasper Vital just before he was murdered." I stroked her hair. "You can stop suspecting me, baby."

"I didn't . . ." She paused and then said weakly: "I was so confused. Everybody was so sure you had the bag and when I found it hidden in the garage cabinet and nothing in it but a bunch

of tools and other things you'd have in your business . . ."

"How did you find it?" I asked.

"Early this morning Allen Gillette asked to borrow your tire pump to pump up his football. I told him it was in the garage, but he couldn't find it. I went back with him and looked in the cabinet. You know how it's crammed with old tubes and rags and tire chains and everything else you stuff into it. I dug down and found the pump. I also found the bag on the bottom in a corner."

"Where is it now?"

She got off my lap and we went out to the hall. The bag sat deep in the hall closet. She had unbuckled the two leather straps and had slit the bag lengthwise near the lock. I lifted it by the bottom and carried it into the living room and set it on the table. I pulled the slit apart and started to take out the contents.

"That's it, of course," I said.

"Adam, do you mean that those things are valuable?"

"More valuable than if the bag had been filled with gold. To them, anyway."

I explained the stuff to her. There were tools for removing serial and motor and license numbers and dies for impressing new numbers on motor blocks and car frames and license plates. There were numbering machines like those used by Motor Vehicle Bureaus and special inks and blank bills of sale and registration blanks from at least a dozen states.

"That's how they did such a thorough job disguising the stolen cars," I said. "The serial and motor numbers of a car are like a person's fingerprints; they're the one sure method of identification. They're stamped on the block or frame or dashboard, depending on the make of car and the year. The carburetors and generators are also numbered. They obliterated the numbers on the blocks or wherever they were and stamped on different ones with the dies and changed the license plates and put in new carburetors and generators. In effect, they altered the basic identity of the cars."

"But the new numbers wouldn't be registered at the Motor Vehicle Bureau," Esther pointed out.

"No, but the job they did was good enough for practical purposes. It could get by ordinary inspection by a cop. Even an expert like Booth Mawrey found his list of stolen cars useless when he tried to match them with the cars in the lot. Registration, bill of sale, license, serial and motor numbers, everything appeared to be in order. But only because they had these tools. That was why they had stopped working when I was there. They couldn't go on until they got the bag back, and they'd do anything at all to get it back."

"And I thought they were just a bunch of old tools." Esther started to giggle. When she didn't stop, I shook her. She tossed her head and drew in her breath. "I've been holding off hysterics for days," she said.

"There's no reason for it now," I told

her. "It's all over. We have the bag and we know who murdered Jasper Vital."

"You do know?"

"George Moon," I said.

She frowned up at me. "But that's what we were so sure of in the beginning, and we thought we were wrong."

"The irony is that we were right. Everything pointed to Moon. You had told him over the phone that the bag was in the car. He'd be expected to hurry right over for it, but he never showed up. The answer seemed to be that he had come without being seen and got it by murdering Vital for it."

"But when he didn't have the bag . . ."

"It put us off the track," I said. "Now that we know where the bag was all along, we're back to the original answer. Both men are dead, so we'll never get the exact details, but it's not hard to see what happened. Moon headed directly for the garage. Why ring the bell and ask for the bag? We might ask him to identify himself and prove he was Teacher's brother and perhaps decide to turn over the bag to the police. It was simpler to go and take it without fuss, if he could. Vital must have just forced the car trunk open when he saw Moon come down the driveway. His escape was cut off. He hid the bag under the junk in the cabinet and then came forward to meet Moon as he entered the garage. Vital wasn't armed, but he knew that Moon didn't like to carry a gun, so they were on even terms. Probably it started merely as an argument."

Esther said: "I was in the house. I

didn't hear a thing."

"They would have kept their voices low. Moon always did anyway, argument or no argument. There they were; two men who hated each other. Each knew why the other was there, of course, and Moon saw the forced car trunk. I think that Vital told Moon that I had tricked him, that I had guessed at the value of the bag and had hidden it. He was anxious not to let Moon suspect that the bag was still in the garage. But that didn't save him. It wasn't the best time and place for a careful man like Moon to kill anybody, not even a man he was committed to kill for doublecrossing him. Maybe Moon lost his head, the way those slow-moving, slow-speaking men sometimes do, or maybe Vital made a gesture Moon thought was toward a gun. The tire iron was right there in the open car trunk. All Moon had to do was stretch out his hand for it."

"And then left without looking for the bag?"

"At any rate, without finding it," I said. "Probably he made a hurried search of the car and the garage. If he opened the cabinet, it seemed to contain only the usual junk you expect to find in it. What was more reasonable than that I had become suspicious when two different men had wanted the bag within a few minutes? And he'd come on Vital without warning, as he thought, and Vital hadn't had it, and a garage was hardly the place where I would have hidden a thing as big as that. But the main thing was that Moon

was in a terrific hurry to get out of there. It isn't healthy to linger in a place where you've just murdered a man, especially when there are houses and people all around."

Esther shuddered. "He might have come into the house."

"No. That was the one thing we were spared. With a murdered man in the garage, and one who'd been part of his organization at that, he wouldn't want to be seen in the neighborhood. His size made him too easy to identify. He had to take the chance that I wouldn't hand the bag over to the police. If I still had it next day, he would try to buy it from me or use more drastic methods to get it."

"How can you be certain that was what happened?"

"The proof is Moon's absolute certainty that I had the bag. He knew that the murderer hadn't taken it, because he was the murderer. That left me."

"And next day the police searched only the house." The giggles started again. With an effort, she controlled them.

"You can't blame the police," I said. "Monday night they'd spent hours in the garage on the usual routine after a murder. Vital had been murdered for the bag; therefore, the murderer had taken the bag with him. They searched the house and my place of business because there was a possibility that I was the murderer or else had hidden the bag before Vital was killed. A garage is no place to hide anything. But a house,

with all the nooks and . . ."

The doorbell rang.

My heart leaped and settled back into place. There was no longer reason to fear the ringing of a bell. The crooks were in jail and the police were welcome.

"Answer the door, baby," I said, "while I put this stuff back in the bag."

Esther went out to the hall. I heard the door open and her friendly greeting and then I heard a husky voice I would never forget.

"It's Miss Crane," Esther called.

"I'll be out in a minute." I had all the stuff back inside. I lifted the bag.

"Hello, Adam," Molly said.

She had come into the living room with Esther. She wore her short belted blue coat and the wide blue ribbon tied around her honey-brown hair and the broad double earrings like wedding rings. Beside her, Esther, small and trim in a simple cotton house dress, looked girlish.

"How are you, Molly?" I said.

"I'm trying to fight off a cold." She wasn't looking at me, but at what was in my hands. "I came to see if you'd recovered."

I put the bag down on the table.

Molly came forward. "So it was here all along, Adam?"

Esther said quickly: "This morning I found it in the garage cabinet. Adam didn't know it was there."

Molly moved to the table and touched the slit in the bag and let her hand fall away. "I suppose Jasper Vital hid it?"

"Just before Moon came into the gar-

age and murdered him," I said.

She nodded: "It had to be something like that to make Moon positive you had the bag." She uttered a short, bitter laugh. "And it was in the garage for anybody to simply walk in and take."

I said quietly: "For you and Larry Goodby to walk in and take."

Molly smiled. It wasn't a major effort. The smile was frozen at the corners and didn't extend to her eyes.

"Larry and I," she said wryly. "Oh, come, Adam, not Larry and I. He was hardly my type."

"Jasper Vital and you," I said. "A handsome lad a woman could easily fall for. Was he your husband?"

Molly thrust both hands into her coat pockets. An elbow held her alligator handbag against her side. "Not exactly my husband, but the nearest thing to it. Toward the end I almost told you, when we were . . ." Her face started to turn toward Esther and stopped and came back to me. "I didn't want you to think too badly of me. But you knew, anyway."

"It built up," I said. "I don't mean because you brought me to your apartment to pump me, and kept your gun always handy, and went with me to Tilly's, and knew a lot of answers. All that could be explained by the fact that you were a newspaper reporter. But there was the coincidence of you driving along that particular street a few moments after Larry slugged me, and the assault was all wrong. A boy could have smashed in my face with a kick, but Larry kicked me twice and didn't do

much more than bruise me, though he had plenty of reason to hate me. But coincidences happen and maybe I'd kept Larry from hurting me more. I wasn't sure of anything about you until you tried to save Larry's life."

Esther's wide, bewildered eyes kept shifting from Molly to me and back.

At the moment she was out of it, a spectator. This was between Molly and me.

"You tried to save Larry's life," I went on, "but he did save yours, and mine too. He was watching your window from the car in the lot. You'd phoned him that morning when you went down to buy rolls. He was to hang around Tilly's place under cover in case you got into serious trouble and needed him. And when I caught him, he didn't give me away to Moon. He had no reason to want to protect me, but if he told Moon that I was Adam Breen, he would also be exposing you. So he kept quiet, and that told me beyond a doubt that you two were working together. There was irony for you. The story I wanted the police and Moon to believe, that you and Larry had planned my abduction, was true after all." I paused and then added: "For a while I thought you really were Clara Darby."

Molly took her right hand out of her coat pocket and let her handbag slip down to her fingers. "I'm not Clara Darby, you can believe that. I got friendly with her a couple of years ago when she and her mother came down to Florida for a few weeks."

"I know you're not. This morning the police spoke to your father in Baltimore."

A shadow crossed her face. "What did my father have to say?"

"That he wasn't surprised the police were asking about you and wasn't interested."

"He would," she said bitterly. "My mother died when I was fourteen. My father hadn't time for me. I guess I was wild anyway, but the way he ignored me didn't help. When I was nineteen, I left home and never came back. And then he blamed me because I wasn't the kind of daughter Dr. Crane could be proud of." Molly scowled as if at herself. "I'm not making excuses. I'm not ashamed of anything I did. Not even . . ."

She stopped. I knew what she meant, and I was angry at her for having come here. I glanced at Esther who was watching with a kind of breathless fascination that tall, attractive woman.

"Two years ago I met Jasper Vital in Miami," Molly continued as if relating something remote in time and not particularly important. "He was nicer than the men I had known. Not only handsome. Considerate and kind. To me, anyway."

"I owe his memory something," I said dryly. "He didn't let Larry come into the house and force Esther to give up her car keys. He sent Larry away with me because he was afraid that the three of us hanging around the garage would bring Esther out of the house. If Larry had stayed, they would have

got the bag and Moon wouldn't have had the chance to kill Vital."

"That was Jasper all right. He had a soft spot for women. He kept me away from his racket. Moon and Rufus Lamb and others came down to Florida occasionally, but none of them saw me or even heard of me. That was why I could go openly to Tilly's."

"Just an innocent lass," I sneered. As soon as the words were out, I regretted them.

Her gold-flecked eyes looked at me without emotion. "I knew what the score was. I knew what money was paying my rent and buying my clothes. When Jasper and Larry decided that they were being rooked by Moon and came north to eliminate him and take over the organization, I didn't hesitate to come along. And when Jasper was murdered, I took up where he had left off. I wanted what was in that bag. You were right, Adam — Larry's attack on you was planned. I wouldn't let him torture you. I persuaded him that I could make you talk in my own way. But you were too much for me — or I thought you were. I couldn't understand why, having the bag, you would want to go to Tilly's. You remember how I tried to talk you out of it. What I was really doing was making you talk so that you would tell me things. When that didn't work, I went with you to Tilly's, because I was sure at that time that you had the bag."

I shook my head. "That's only part of it."

"Is it?" Molly stepped backward, not

taking her eyes off me. Her hands fumbled at the catch of her handbag. "What's the other part, Adam?" she said softly.

She shouldn't have come here. She was making more of a mess of it than it already was.

"I don't have to put it into words," I said.

Molly twisted her head to Esther who stood with the rapt expression of a child listening to tales of ghosts and witches. "You can't understand a woman like me, can you Mrs. Breen?" Molly said mockingly. "That's why you're the right wife for Adam." She turned back to me, and a reckless grimace lifted one corner of her mouth. "So you know that too, Adam?"

"Why talk about it?"

"Say it, Adam. You'll say worse about me in a little while. Say I killed George Moon."

A sound came from Esther. It was less than a gasp, hardly more than a sharp intake of breath. Molly was right. Esther would never be able to understand her or even quite believe in her reality.

"You're anxious to find out from me if there's evidence," I said to Molly. "I doubt it. I guessed because I was so close to you all the time. There was the pattern — a woman avenges the murder of the man she loves. More than that, there were overtones of moods, emotions, attitudes. Your changing moods at Tilly's had me bewildered. You wanted to leave and at the same time you wanted to stay. You were friendly and

remote, gay and sullen, intense and apathetic. You were a woman under the terrific stress of making up her mind to kill a man. You were dressing when I came into the room after finding Moon's body. You were ready to leave in a hurry, and at the same time you no longer seemed to care much about what was happening. You'd done your job, you'd had your revenge, and there was nothing left for you."

Molly waved a hand across her face as if brushing away an invisible obstruction. She said wearily: "It seems pointless now. I felt it was something Larry and I had to do. The gangster's code of vengeance, and we were gangsters, weren't we?" She laughed tonelessly. "Larry didn't think you'd had time to kill Jasper. He would have got the bag out of the car and left before you could have returned. We figured it was probably Moon because we knew he was also coming for the bag. But he hadn't the bag, which meant that you had it. There were different angles to the two things I wanted — the bag and the killer. But I had to be certain that Moon was the killer. You remember he took me drinking and dancing Thursday night. I told him that in New York I had heard that a man named Breen had killed Jasper and then had stolen a valuable bag which had belonged to him, Moon. He smiled and said that Breen hadn't killed Jasper, but that he had the bag. He was so sure and kept smiling, and that told me what I wanted to know. And then later that night, when we all stood

around Larry's body, he said something else."

"I remember," I said. "Moon said that a few days ago there had been two rats and now there was none. If that meant anything, it meant that he had killed them both."

"Yes." Molly opened the catch of her handbag and snapped it viciously shut. "I wouldn't have killed him!" she burst out. "All at once I saw that it wasn't important to me whether he lived or died. And I saw that Jasper hadn't been very important to me, either. Maybe it was because I'd met you. I'd never known a man like you; you made me see things differently. The bag was still important, yes—it was worth something, but murder wasn't." She stared at the floor. "And then they shot down Larry."

I didn't get it. "Did Larry mean so much to you?"

"No. Larry was a mug. But he worshiped me. I think he would have given his life for me. In a way he did. He knew the danger of coming to Tilly's and watching over me. He didn't expose you because he knew that would expose me. And Moon had him shot down. I hadn't cried when Jasper died, but that night I cried."

I looked at Esther. She had retreated all the way to the club chair. One hand gripped the high back. Her eyes were never so big and dark.

Then Molly was saying in a voice suddenly strong and crisp: "I hate to do this, Adam, but I want that bag."

I turned back to her. She had opened

her handbag and had taken a gun out of it.

This one was a revolver and bigger than her pearl-handled automatic, but she held it as steadily and competently. The muzzle pointed at my heart.

There was a breathless moment of silence and then I heard Esther start to whimper. She leaned one hip against the club chair and stared at the gun as if it were an incredible thing from another world.

"There's nothing to worry about," I told her. "She's not going to shoot anybody."

Molly said: "All I want is the bag."

I hadn't moved from the table since Molly had entered the room. The bag was no more than twelve inches from my hand. I put the backs of my thighs against the edge of the table. "So you knew the bag was here, Molly?"

"Oh, God, I told her!" Esther's fingers clawed at her mouth. "She phoned me this morning that you were safe and resting, and I asked her to tell you to call me as soon as you awoke because I had found something important."

"She was too excited to be subtle," Molly commented. "So I came here as soon as I could."

"With a gun," I said dryly. "Moon had taken your automatic. You were delayed getting another gun."

Her mouth had a to-hell-with-it twist. She didn't like to do this, but she could do whatever she thought she had to. Her broad shoulders were very square. She looked as indomitable as when she had faced Moon and Rufus and the

others in the sitting room with a smaller gun in her hand.

"Listen," she said. "Once George Moon was offered one hundred thousand dollars for those tools. That was during the war when cars fetched almost any price in the black market. Now they're worth less — say fifty thousand dollars, or at least twenty-five thousand. I know some men who'll put cash on the line for them. Listen! We're the only three people who know you have the bag. I'll handle the sale and give you half."

"You know the answer, Molly."

"At least twelve thousand dollars for your share. Maybe double that. Adam, think of what you can do with all that money."

"You're a good salesman," I said, "but not that good."

Her head jerked back. The yellow flecks in her gray eyes glittered. "An honest man!" she said derisively. "Do you know what your honesty did?"

"I know."

"Jasper offered you five hundred dollars for that bag. Do you know what would have happened if you had taken it? Jasper and Larry wouldn't be dead now. I wouldn't have killed George Moon. Your wife wouldn't have gone through hell, and you and I through worse than that. What did honesty get you?"

I said: "You'd better go, Molly."

"Go?" She brought a hand up to her face and realized the gun was in it and turned the muzzle back toward me. Suddenly there was a fever in her gray eyes and her red lips quivered. "I

thought you'd be like that, Adam. That's why I brought a gun. I'll go with the bag. Get away from the table."

"Don't do it, Molly," I said. "You'll compel me to tell the police that you went off with the bag."

"I want it, Adam. I've gone through too much not to get it now. I've lost Jasper. I've lost other things. The bag is all that's left."

As if from a distance, I heard Esther's voice thin with terror. "Oh, God, Adam, give it to her! Why don't you give it to her?"

The gun was thrust out from Molly's side. The sleeve of her coat was pulled back and on her wrist I saw a thin gold charm bracelet. It was close enough to me so that I could distinguish individual charms — tiny hearts and boxing gloves and horns and arrows and watches and books.

"Damn you, Adam, are you going to make me shoot you?"

"You won't shoot," I said. "Not after the room under the barn and the reservoir."

The eyes faltered. A sob shook the tall body. "Damn you!" The gun dipped. She turned a shoulder to me and stood like that for a moment and then moved slowly away.

I went to Esther. She had sunk into the club chair and sat crouched against one arm. I placed a hand on her shoulder. She didn't stir.

Molly had stopped at the door. Her handbag was open. She had substituted her huge plastic compact for the gun and was dabbing powder on her face. Within seconds she had become com-

pletely relaxed — another of her lightning changes of mood. She snapped the compact, snapped the handbag, and brought her deluxe smile to her face.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Breen," she said. "I should have known that Adam would be too much for me. I envy you. I envy you Adam and Carol and the two other children you're going to have."

Molly took a step through the door and turned. "Good-bye, Adam. It was nice knowing you."

We listened to her walk up the hall and . . . out through the front door.

I went to one of the two front windows.

"Adam, are you going to tell the police?"

"She didn't take the bag."

Esther fumbled at the buttons of her dress. "She admitted she murdered a man."

"Only to us," I said. "She will deny it to the police. And there is absolutely no proof. There never will be."

"You don't want her arrested." She made that sound like an accusation. I realized then that Esther had guessed much of what had happened to Molly and me during those three days and nights we had spent together.

"For having done what I twice thought of doing myself?" I said. "No, I don't want her arrested for that."

Carol and Susan Levy squatted on the sidewalk in front of the house. Be-

tween them lay, as if on display, Carol's purchases from the corner stationery store — a ball on a rubber cord, a plastic fife, a toy jeep, a cellophane bag full of brightly colored hard candies. The girls' heads were cocked, their eyes fixed gravely on Molly who stood over them. Molly said something that caused Carol to jump to her feet and open her mouth wide as if in a soundless exclamation that had frozen.

I heard Esther come to my side. She reached for my hand. Together we stood looking out to the street.

Molly was removing the charm bracelet from her wrist. She stopped to fasten it around Carol's skinny wrist while Carol and Susan watched in awe. Then Molly straightened up and patted Carol's head and moved on to her coupe at the curb.

"She loves you, Adam," Esther said in a small, tight voice.

"She could never love anybody but herself," I murmured because that was the best thing to say.

Molly opened the car door and looked back at the house and saw us at the window. She waved to us. I lifted my hand and dropped it. A breeze plucked at the fringe of her long bob as she got into the car. After she had driven away, the street felt empty.

"You care very much for her," Esther said quietly.

"I love you," I said fiercely and turned to her.

THE END

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THE PIGSKIN BAG

There was blood in Adam's car when he opened it that evening—blood and a heavy locked pigskin bag. When he walked into the house his hysterical wife told him that because of the bag a man had died. But Adam was a quiet man who hated violence. He didn't care what was in the bag nor who wanted it, not even when a gunman was shot trying to steal it. But when a sadistic murderer took him for a ride and a tall, drawling racketeer tried to hold his daughter for ransom Adam realized that even a quiet man can be pushed too far. And then he walked with cold rage into a brutal, murderous world where he had no weapon but a hatred which was strange and terrifying.

